

GENRE FLUIDITY AND WRITING IDENTITY:
ACTIVIST WRITERS, QUEER FEMINIST RHETORICS,
WORKING FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

by

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My dissertation proffers *genre fluidity* as a term to describe the rhetorical acts of shifting across and moving among genre conventions by blending and/or transgressing genre boundaries. *Genre fluidity* is defined as two rhetorical strategies writers and communicators use:

1. employing multiple texts in multiple conventional genre forms for one purpose; and
2. combining and reshaping conventions of multiple genre forms within a single text.

Here, I construct both of these practices—multi-text single-focus writing and mixed-genre single-text writing—as queer rhetorical moves with broad applicability. My project focuses on Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Alice Walker along with four local activist-writers in Eastern North Carolina, examining connections between identity and writing as a way to better understand genre-fluid rhetorical practices. The organization models genre fluidity by including digressions and interruptions of memoir, brief polemics, and a bit of storytelling. I also deliberately cross boundaries by focusing on well-known writers and their texts (humanities scholarship) and working with community member participants (social science scholarship) who are activists engaged in working for social and economic justice (the ultimate goal of my work). This intentional genre-fluidity in the text is queer (open to new forms and to possible failure) and feminist (multi-

vocal and praxis-oriented), and it is both personal and political. Drawing on queer and feminist scholarship as well as writing studies and rhetorical genre studies, I explore the writing practices of community activists for social and economic justice. I argue that aggregating existing scholarship of these rhetorical practices through a genre-fluid framing is a necessary prequel to further study. Significant attention to genre fluidity holds the promise of extending research and critical inquiry in rhetoric and rhetoric-adjacent fields. Genre-fluid practices can leverage commonalities and connections across genre (and disciplinary) boundaries for existing and not-yet-encountered rhetorical contexts in public discourse and in business and professional communication.

Keywords: *genre fluidity, genre-fluid, writing studies, genre, rhetoric, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alice Walker, community writing, activism, rhetorical genre studies, writing transfer studies, technical communication, professional communication, business communication*

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By

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DEDICATION

To my Grandmother Nancy,
who passed on from this life,
but whose memory will always be a blessing.

To Christopher, who was not able to be there with me.

To Abigail, Justin, Marcell, and Iaunnah.
Whatever road you take and whatever choices you make,
know that you are in my heart.

M'J said, *All the things you experienced in the past
and all people who was there for you, it comes with you.*
And he was not wrong.

And to all of those
whose lives and loves and laughs,
whose writing
and so much more,
has never
quite
fit:

This is for you.

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CHAPTER 1—COMING OUT AS GENRE-FLUID: AN INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice.... I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me....

To show that I can and that I will write.... And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

The focus of this dissertation is *genre fluidity*, which I conceptualize as specific strategies writers and rhetors use. By employing multiple genre forms for one purpose, or by combining and reshaping multiple genre conventions within a single text, writers and rhetors can perform genre fluidity in sophisticated and strategic ways. This dissertation constructs both of these practices—multi-text single-focus writing and mixed-genre single-text writing—as queer rhetorical moves with broad applicability. My research study focused on individuals in a community-based writing group, examining connections between writerly identity and genre-fluid rhetorical practices, and I argue that genre fluidity has potential to expand understanding of the range of tools and strategies writers can employ to accomplish rhetorical goals.

Genre-fluidity's multiplicitous quality parallels the complexity of identities, holding the promise of richer expressions of individuality in the work of writers engaged in public discourse. Given this potential, I argue that aggregating existing scholarship of these rhetorical practices through a genre-fluid framing is a necessary prequel to further study—and this dissertation project begins that ambitious work. “Rhetoric is a *techne*’, or art of knowing—a revealing, an opening up,” according to Haas (2012, p. 287), and genre fluidity has the potential to open up the field of rhetoric—and, more broadly, the humanities, as disciplines that

engage language in overtly rhetorical ways—to a deeper and more complex understanding of genre-fluid strategies writers and rhetors use to communicate with all kinds of audiences.

For my dissertation research, I recruited community members who identified as activists who were working toward social and economic justice and organized a community writing group where we met to talk about writing. Participants were not required to identify as writers, only to be willing to talk about the writing they did. All of their writing—regardless of genre format and without regard to whether or not they saw an explicit connection between their writing and their activism—became part of those conversations. I interviewed each participant individually at the beginning of the study and after the fact; in some cases, I conducted brief one-on-one interviews on specific topics during the weeks the writing group was meeting. I also recorded some group conversations from when the writing group met together.

This project was designed to focus on the activists participating in the writing group, especially on how multiple facets of their identities and the contexts for their writing work connected to the writing strategies and genre-related choices they made. While we sometimes discussed the texts they created and the steps of the writing processes they used, the primary inquiry was focused on the *writers*, on their identities and contexts, and on their rhetorical moves rather than the writing that resulted from the choices they made.

FOREMOTHERS AND BOOKS: A DIGRESSION

As an avid reader and collector of biographies and autobiographies, my favorites of these—and the only books I still collect—are almost always about writers and their lives. These stories in turn stir me to read significant portions of the published work by these writers. At some point I realized that most of my favorite writers have written in multiple genre formats. Many are novelists and fiction writers; most have also written significant texts in a range of genre forms such as critical essays, personal narratives, long-form nonfiction, profiles, news stories, poetry, and more. Some have written and published multi- or mixed-genre works, despite popular—and quite narrow—misconceptions about what writers do and what specific genre forms should encompass. This curiosity about who my favorite writers are—and by implication, how their identities and values shape their writing—is one impetus for this dissertation project.

Another driver of this project is the desire to work for social change. I have taught in the college classroom, but have also taught in community centers, churches, daycare centers, family shelters, and other locations. These experiences taught me, among many other things, that there are multiple contexts where creativity and learning can intertwine with self-advocacy and self-empowerment. My personal commitments to racial justice and class equity, gender parity, LGBTQ+ civil rights, and similar social justice issues come from my own experiences as well as those of students and families with whom I have worked closely. These values mean I am deeply invested in addressing systemic inequities and barriers that limit opportunity and even basic human rights for many.

An additional prompt for my doctoral research comes from the way some writer-activists have used multiple and mixed genre forms to amplify the impact of their work at the intersections of identity and social and economic justice. Most centrally, my focus on genre fluidity is inspired by the work of Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Alice Walker. These three writers have long inspired me on a personal level and in my scholarly work, and I look to them as the foremothers of this project. Models for the strategic rhetorical approaches I explore in this dissertation include Lorde's multi-faceted writing about the aims of racial justice and equality for all sexualities and genders, Anzaldúa's expansive multi- and mixed-genre writing that encompassed all her identities, and Walker's womanism and wide-ranging catalogue of work in support of human rights—all of which have significant breadth and power.

Texts such as Lorde's *Zami* and Anzaldúa's *La Frontera* remain relatively unusual and are often placed—if uneasily—into genres of literature or theory by scholars. Even writers who publish ostensibly single-genre texts in more than one genre, such as Walker, are apparently difficult to classify. To illustrate an instance of this discomfort carrying over into commercial spaces, I offer the following story. Visiting the famed Powell's Books while in Portland, Oregon, in 2017 was a must for a book lover such as myself; but the outsized bookstore seemed to share the struggle I have observed in academia: the formal genre divisions failed to serve, just as sometimes-facile departmental or disciplinary boundaries result in ill-fitting and even precarious academic identities. The Anzaldúa texts were all in gender and sexuality studies (including her poetry), the scant Lorde offerings (none of which were poetry volumes) were shelved in poetry, and Walker's books were all in the literature stacks—including memoir, theoretical works, political essays, and the like, shelved alongside her novels, poetry, and short stories.

Despite an organizational scheme and store layout which claimed to sort and display texts based on genre forms—and a computer inventory system that should be capable of tracking authors whose work could appear in multiple departments—these difficult-to-pigeonhole (at least by genre) writers seemed to tax the existing system. And, yes, I did check with a clerk, who searched the store's database for these three names and confirmed that none had work shelved in multiple departments. Since even commercial interests—whose sales numbers and profits depend on customers finding books they want to purchase—struggle to identify texts and writers by genre form, this conundrum may be emblematic of the difficulties readers, writers, and scholars may experience with the same issue.

In conceptualizing certain strategic rhetorical performances as *genre-fluid*, I deliberately draw on language from the queer community—where a recognition that both gender and sexuality are not fixed has generated such terms as *gender-fluid* and *sexually fluid* to describe gender identities and sexual orientations as changing, situational, and resistant to discrete categorization. *Gender-fluidity* recognizes that gender is a dynamic mix of shifting identifications and non-identifications with traditional genders (Urban Dictionary, n.d.), is unfixed (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and has long been understood as performed rather than innate (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Sexuality is also a fluid and multiplicitous concept; it encompasses self-identity or labeling, sexual orientation or attraction, and sexual behavior (Johns, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2013), though these three components of sexuality do not

necessarily align (Copen, Chandra, & Febo-Vasquez, 2016). I proffer *genre fluidity* as a queered approach to the act of writing genres—where writers shift between and among genre conventions and blend or transgress those boundaries in varied ways. Both gender and sexuality are contextual and reciprocal identities that “vary across people’s real-life social contexts” (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017, p. 612); in much the same way, rhetoric is situational and reciprocal (Glenn & Lunsford, 2015; LeFevre, 1987), so borrowing *fluidity* from its usage in conceptualizing gender and sexuality is a useful exercise for understanding the rhetorical moves genre-fluid writers make.

To further this parallel usage, gender fluidity’s rejection of “the rigidity of the gender binary and gender roles” allows for individuals to be “empowered,” “authentic,” and “free” (Gray, 2015, para. 2 & 5). A binary choice where there should be a host of possibilities is narrowly restrictive; gendered expectations enforce behavior boundaries that limit authentic expression—and being forced to perform an ill-fitting gender is both time-consuming and energy-depleting. An escape or release from expectations and requirements can free our creativity and make room for a wider range of self-expression. Even the opportunity to see what happens when others have broken out of gender binaries can highlight possibilities that we may never have thought possible. This dissertation likewise argues that genre-fluid writing strategies have potential to expand the power and authenticity of writers who cross, ignore, or blur genre boundaries. Significant attention to genre fluidity as a useful construct in writing and rhetoric holds the promise of extending research and critical inquiry in rhetoric and writing studies—modeling, reshaping, or altering common genre forms for existing and newly-encountered rhetorical contexts.

In developing genre fluidity as a subject for critical inquiry and a source of rhetorical power, I draw on prior scholarship in *multivocality* and in *multimodality*, using genre to expand and queer those concepts. As I explore below, multivocality is generally understood as multiple voices in a single mode, and multimodality is often conceived as a single voice employing multiple modes. In a similar way, a writer’s use of multiple genre formats in a single project functions in multivocal ways.

These sites of blurring occur when genre forms are understood as voices or as modes, when genre forms include multiple voices or modes, and when multiple genre forms are combined into a text. As the

following discussion makes clear, the multiplicitous nature of voices, modes, and genre conventions seems already somewhat blurred—and a queered analysis of these concepts may provide insights that are difficult to grasp in a more conventional examination.

A feminist rhetorical strategy, *multivocal* composition is the combining of two or more voices—whether these be multiple voices from one author or the work of two or more authors—into a single text, while intentionally allowing each voice to remain authentic and distinct. Multivocality rejects the primacy of the single-voiced and single-argument academic model, which is generally seen as a patriarchal construct (Massey, 2003); it resists homogenized co-authorship that blends the writing from two or more scholars into a single ostensibly neutral whole. *Multivocality* is also a feminist push-back against the idea of a monolithic concept of authorship in favor of one that values community, connection, and multiple perspectives. Authorship scholars Robillard and Fortune (2016) described writing as “a messy process” with “a multiplicity of hands...contributing indirectly and directly to what the text becomes” (p. 10), and their work—including an edited collection (*Authorship Contested*, 2016) featuring the work of an additional dozen scholars—has contributed to an understanding of authorship that is always multiplicitous.

Overtly multivocal writing written collectively is not a new concept, of course. One example is *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1978), which claims no single author. This manifesto of solidarity as activists and Black feminists stated the group’s commitments to opposing oppressions bases on race, gender, sexuality, and class; it introduced and embraced the concept of identity politics, traced the history of Black feminism and of the Collective, and discussed the political concerns and projects they were involved in (Smith, 1983). Representing the voices of hundreds of women, the Combahee statement was written primarily by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier (Wayne, 2014). Its powerful use of the collective “we,” on behalf of so many feminist Black women, was both literally and figuratively a multivocal work. Another example of collective writing that showcases the strength of multivocal work was the acceptance speech crafted by Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich in 1974, when these three were among the nominees for a National Book Award (White, 2004). Sure that, at most, only one of them would win, these women wrote one

acceptance speech, with the agreement that if any of them won that the speech would be read. In it, the authors accepted the award

in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain...We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class: the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teen-ager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress, the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work. (Lorde, Walker, & Rich, 1974, as quoted in Martin, 2017)

Rich described this joint acceptance speech as “a little collective action,” stating that “we admired each other’s work, we cared about each other’s work, and we didn’t feel like we wanted to be set in competition with each other” (Goodman, 1997). “We knew how rare we were, all three being honored at the same time,” Walker later said, “we also knew most women poets and artists were still being unread and unhonored” (White, 2004, p. 271). This multivocal rhetorical act went beyond gender solidarity and a rejection of competition between writers; in current parlance, Rich’s participation was that of a co-conspirator. According to Walker:

We knew—Audre and I—and probably Adrienne as well—that whatever was offered would go to Adrienne; I think she felt unable to accept anything for herself in the context of our exclusions. She would not stand for our being window dressing. (Walker, as quoted in White, 2004, p. 271)

Myers Zawacki’s¹ (1992) use of multivocal composition suggests this strategy as a way to “hear voices which have been marginalized or silenced by” the privileging of single-authored academic “argument as the prevailing mode of discourse” (p. 34). Feminist composition scholarship addresses collaborative writing (Ede & Lunsford, 1990) as multivocality, and scholars have also noted voices can take diverse forms: for example, voices can come from home and school (Lu, 1987), be experimental and diverse (Bridwell-Bowles, 1992), or

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I have followed the APA 7 (2020) format for citing scholars with two surnames who use both names professionally. In these instances, APA now calls for using both surnames in narrative and parenthetical citations rather than only doing so when the names are hyphenated. The practice is inclusive of cultures where two surnames are commonly used, and it acknowledges the original last names of women who retained them along with an additional surname added by marriage. As a result, some citations will be different than they were in the past. For example, high-profile scholars such as Jacqueline Jones Royster, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Kathleen Blake Yancey appear in the references under J, T, and Y, respectively. (And for this same reason, I have stopped using my full name in professional contexts. I kept my last name when I married, and added the additional surname as a middle name—and I want citations of my work in APA to be cited as Nancy, R. K.)

be artificial and nostalgic (Heilbrun, 1988). This scholarship generally hails multivocality as a strategy for drawing on complexity, authenticity, and a shift away from entrenched patriarchal power.

Queering this idea of multivocality, I suggest that employing multiple genre forms or conventions as voices is a genre-based extension of multivocal rhetorical strategy—one that allows the complexity of intersectional identities to enrich an individual writer’s work. Unlike a homogenized use of Standard Written English (SWE, sometimes labeled as academic English), which privileges detachment and the pretense of impersonal scholarship along with privileging the construct of a single authorial voice, genre fluidity allows for multiplicity in ways that can incorporate complexity to celebrate and articulate identity, personality, culture, history, and language. Thus, genre fluidity is a critical concept in cultural rhetorics. Anzaldúa (1987/2012) stressed the importance of these multiplicitous connections when she wrote “I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one” (p. 95). Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an example of this queered and liminal multivocality, where varied genre forms act as different voices of this writer. Her “Mestiza Way” of writing contains proverbial multitudes, empowering “her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity” and resulting in her being “able to transform herself” (p. 104). This text is a deliberate assemblage of thematic messages—rendered in overlapping authorial voices, combining narrative, poetry, essay, polemic, and more—and is thus an example of queered multivocal writing.

Multimodality, in its simplest definition, is the use of multiple modes to achieve rhetorical goals. For the purposes of this discussion, I use *mode* in two ways: in the linguistic sense (such as narrative, description, summary, and argument) of multimodal written texts and genre forms; and in the communication studies sense (as in delivery modes such as verbal, written, visual, and aural) as communication forms and genre forms that are more (or other) than written words. Using this broad definition of *modes*, multimodality can refer to a single genre form that includes both narrative and argument (such as a journal article based on narrative case studies) or that includes text and visual elements (such as a conference presentation slide deck about the same case study research project). Further, multimodality can be a mixed-genre text such as Lorde’s *Zami* and Anzaldúa’s *La Frontera* or—as this dissertation attempts to model—can be a scholarly manuscript that is interspersed with stories and other digressions.

As an expanding range of digital tools allow for evermore eclectic communication modes, multimodality has long been something “more and other than writing” (Shipka, 2005, p. 300) and refers to a wide range of composition practices (Palmeri, 2012). Among these are the use of figures and images within or alongside text, of course, but multimodality also may include other visual design elements in printed and electronic texts, the creation of born-digital hypertexts, and the embedding of video or audio files in a visual or written composition. Rhetorically, this work is purposefully composed to shape the way a work is read and understood (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Kitalong & Miner, 2017). Multimodality makes space for new ideas (Blake Yancey, 2004), fosters agency in a range of contexts (Kitalong & Miner, 2017), and prompts “critical engagement and rhetorical flexibility” (Shipka, 2005, p. 293). In writing studies, including composition and rhetoric, multi- and mixed-genre writing as well as multimodal composing are seen as “purposeful uptake, transformation, incorporation, combination, [and] juxtaposition” (Shipka, 2005, p. 278). It is also a form of synthesis (Kitalong & Miner, 2017) that can result in “ever more fluid and flexible composers” (p. 40) who craft “more precise and potentially more powerful messages” (p. 53). As Tardy (2015) has noted, writing studies and composition divide genre fluidity along distinct lines: genre mixing understood as purposeful and written by established experts is valued as innovative, and genre-fluid work from writers perceived as novices who may be ignorant of genre conventions and boundaries is dismissed as an error².

In queering multimodality to conceptualize genre fluidity, I recognize that texts of all kinds can be fluid in terms of linguistic and communication modes, and can be fluid in genre form. By framing genre possibilities as simultaneously encompassing multiple incarnations of vocality and of modality, genre fluidity both explodes and builds on these ideas. Born out of the liminal space between multimodality and multivocality, genre fluidity takes a both/and approach to inclusivity—which again echoes the ever-widening and always-fluid understanding of queer identities. A writer may employ a range of genre forms in one text, with the multiplicity of a writer’s identity represented by voices. A writer may use conventional genre forms

² As a feminist scholar focused on genre fluidity, I emphatically resist viewing genre-fluid work by so-called non-experts as less valuable. In my own case, writing definitely came before education and training *about* writing. And, as I have written before (Nancy, 2016), my once-outsider status has definitely kept my view of “writing” a broad one. See also Sharer’s (2003) discussion of genre disruptions by marginalized folx and genre convention shifts by newcomers to discourse communities. Also, creating a single genre text in perfectly conventional ways for an assignment grade is not necessarily communicating effectively with an audience.

that employ a range of modes, and make use of a single voice throughout. Or, a writer may draw on multiple voices and use multiple genre forms as well as multiple modes—and the kaleidoscopic result, in all its glorious complexity, may achieve rhetorical aims like nothing before it could.

Among those possibilities, genre-fluid strategies and practices have potential for expanding engagement with public rhetorics and civic discourse. Because “rhetoric seeks engagement with and participation in effective and responsible civic discourse” (Haas, 2012, p. 287) and “rhetorical practice is fundamentally a function of organizations” (Grabill, 2007, p. 115), the employment of genre fluidity has potential for institutions, organizations, and individuals to extend and diversify the rhetorical strategies used in the public sphere. Likewise, genre fluidity has great potential for re-thinking the framing of writing pedagogy. Jung’s (2005) study of multi-genre texts and a host of other scholars cited above have inspired me to question the genre-form-based approach that I believe shapes too much of our collective understanding of writing. Convenience and expediency can make static genre forms appealing (Wardle, 2009); but there are other factors to consider.

Rhetorical genre studies posits genre as an action; beginning with purpose, or what a rhetor wants to *do*, may not mean that a particular genre form is always the default option. Considering a range of genre forms for a particular goal—or, to put it another way, considering more than one of the available means—rather than trying to assign a purpose to a pre-selected genre form could be a better approach. Re-thinking the way we construct assignments and assignment sequences in the writing classroom may better prepare writing students for engaging rhetorically in the ever-changing and genre-complex contexts they encounter. Rhetorical genre studies has taken up the idea of genre fluidity—at least tangentially, though not through use of this specific term—and has also taken up several related concepts in ways that signal its potential importance. Yet I believe genre fluidity has not reached the level of sustained attention it deserves, and so I proffer this specific term and conceptual description as a necessary step to encourage scholarship on genre fluidity—as a characteristic action of writers that can be developed, and as a spur to new approaches in writing pedagogy. I assert that identifying genre fluidity in writing practices as a concept of interest becomes an important step toward establishing it as a priority in academic research.

My ideas about genre fluidity also emerge in part from the wealth of writing transfer research now available. For example, Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) describe writers who focus on firm genre distinctions as “boundary guarders,” and found these writers were less likely to transfer writing skills into new contexts when compared to “boundary crossers” (p. 325). The latter, who I might term genre-fluid writers, focus on general strategies rather than specific genre conventions and exhibit a “willingness to deploy, transform, and even abandon existing discursive resources” (p. 330). Genre-fluid boundary crossers who engage in “reformulating and transforming existing resources” are more likely to succeed at transfer than those who do not (p. 330). Based on this scholarship, my research and my advocacy for the term genre fluidity both have implications for connecting writing studies to rhetoric and to business, professional, and technical communication. And if genre-fluid writers are better equipped to engage in “survivalist strategies” that provide “bridges to other literacies and technologies” (Banks, 2017), then genre fluidity research also has critical implications for cultural rhetorics and for social justice work both inside and outside the academy.

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Ensuring clarity is central to successful communication in all contexts, so this chapter necessarily includes a discussion of terms and concepts underpinning my project’s focus on genre fluidity.

Though *genre* is frequently used in other contexts to refer to formalized categories of texts or writing formats, I use terms such as genre *forms*, genre *conventions*, and genre *norms* to distinguish between the *work* rhetors engage in and the resulting *texts*. In this I assert that genre is an action rather than a form, drawing on Miller (1984), who claimed “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151). I deliberately use this alternative language to describe categories of common or similar kinds of texts. I also engage with the term *rhetoric* in an expansive way. In classical Aristotelian terms, rhetoric is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Rhetoric, 2010) and a more contemporary definition, broadly conceived as communication with a purpose, is also a plural: rhetorics. Rhetors are purposeful communicators, regardless

of mode or venue, so rhetors include writers as well as all who use speech, visuals, performance, or digital delivery modes—and those who use multiple modes to communicate.

My understanding of rhetoric as a *performance*—like the term genre fluidity itself—draws from queer rhetorics and the conception of gender and sexual identity as, in part, enacted: something individuals do rather than who or what they are (Butler 1990). Current rhetorical scholarship generally aligns with this understanding of rhetorical performance; this includes Young (2018), who writes that “the institutions, publics, and students we serve often think rhetoric is simply ‘words, words, words,’” but goes on to insist “we think of rhetoric and composition as live, as embodied actions, as behaviors, yes, as performances” (para. 1). And like my broad use of *text* to include artifacts incorporating more than sentences or paragraphs on a page or screen, the understanding of *writing* used here also includes visual or other modes. Likewise, *rhetorical* is a frequent modifier of writing, both for the performances and strategic choices of rhetors and writers, and for the texts they produce.

The use of the term *queer* in my work is in part a reclaiming of the word from its pejorative use, but here I employ it primarily in the academic sense: *queering* is about disrupting norms and rejecting binaries, embracing uncertainty and multiplicity. Despite its history as a slur, *queer* is fairly established in the academy, particularly when used in queer theory, which grew out of “a radical critique of identity-based politics, a history of sexual minorities and their practices, and a rejection of the homo-hetero binary model of sexual identities” (Halberstam, 1997, p. 257). This radical and destabilizing approach has focused scholarship on—and beyond—identity while providing a lens to re-examine and question norms in a range of contexts:

Queer Theory explores the interface of gender and sexuality with the cross-currents of race, ethnicity, social class, and individual bodily existence (complete with all the subcategories that pertain thereunto). It contends that our culture imposes upon us multiple “essentialist” identities that fragment us into strings of hyphenated racial, ethnic, gender-related, and body-image labels—labels that we vainly hope will “name” each individual “me.” (Gearhardt, 2003, pp. xx-xxx)

Further, queer theory “suggests that every part of our identity is both fluid and mixed, and is thus capable of transformation” (Gearhardt, 2003, pp. xxx), and it “effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences” (Halperin, 2009, p. 341).

Beyond academic circles, *queer* has also been reclaimed in social and activist spaces, too, where it is in frequent

use because “the term is valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities” (PFLAG, 2018, n.p.).

The term *feminism* also requires definition for this project, as it must in some ways also be reclaimed. When used without a modifier, feminism is commonly portrayed as a relic of the past, with goals of equality that have (supposedly) been achieved already, and is “stereotyped as unnecessarily aggressive” as well as “angry and humourless” (Hemmings, 2011, pp. 7-8). This generic feminism is also associated with middle- and upper-class white women and a Western or even Anglo-American perspective (Hemmings, 2011; Henry, 2010; Reger, 2017; Whittner, 1995); it is frequently short-handed as second-wave feminism (Cobble, 2010; Hewitt, 2010; Nicholson, 2010; Reger, 2017; Whittner, 1995). This narrow understanding of feminism is also sometimes tagged as liberal feminism, and it centered on legal rights to banking and credit, abortion rights, and opportunities for professional employment in the U.S. (Steinem, 1994). It is also often described as white feminism³, in part as a contrast to Black feminism and more broadly because of the frequent exclusion and silencing of women of color by that strand of the larger feminist movement in the late 20th century (Anzaldúa, 1985/2004; Hewitt, 2010; Lorde, 1993b/1984; Nadasen, 2002; Moraga, 1981; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Russo, 1991; Smith, 1982; Walker, 1983).

Of course, this 1960s-1980s movement in the U.S. frequently described as second-wave or as white was much more complex than those appellations imply. Sometimes characterized as about the ‘right to work’—as though working-class and poverty-class women were not already working (hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984/1993b; Smith, 1982)—that strand of feminism was not as race-segregated or as class-segregated as it is sometimes perceived to be (Breines, 2007; Cobble, 2010; Roth, 2002; Thompson, 2002). And the characterization of feminist movements as linear and progressive waves is both overly simplified (Henry, 2004; Hewitt, 2010; Reger, 2017) and contested (Hemmings, 2011; Hewitt, 2010; Whittner, 1995). The plural,

³ This means that when someone says or writes something like “white feminism is about gaining equal access to power within systems, and Black feminism is about dismantling those systems of power” they do not mean that *feminists who are white* are all therefore supporters of racist ablist cis-het patriarchy and Eurocentric colonial imperialism. Instead, they are referencing the specific and widely-popularized strand of first- and second-wave U.S. feminism that centered on gaining political and economic power for (frankly, mostly white) women.

feminisms, is more specific and accurate, which is why—as is the case for several terms in this section—articulating what I mean when I describe myself as a feminist is necessary.

In this dissertation and beyond, when I use the term *feminism* without a modifier or describe myself⁴ as *feminist*, I explicitly employ these terms as they are understood by Black feminism, sometimes called radical Black feminism⁵. According to hooks (1981), feminism is a “commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination” based on identities of—“to name a few”—gender, race, and class “so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (pp. 191-192). Smith (1982) defined feminism as “the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women” (p. 49). When I use the term feminism and describe myself as feminist, I am not writing about centering the goal of accessing power parity within an existing social and economic system; instead, I am writing about and embracing Black feminism, which has long focused on dismantling those systems of power.

Further, I embrace the label of *womanist*-feminist to describe myself most accurately. Alice Walker (1983) coined the term *womanist* in the preface to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. The four-part definition⁶ (pp. xi-xii) she wrote included a description of the term's origins: from *womanish*, or “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” and “Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.” Walker asserted a *womanist* is “A black feminist or feminist of color” who is “Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people.” She also defined a womanist as “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength.” A womanist, she continued, is “Traditionally universalist” and “Traditionally

⁴ In Chapter 3, I write extensively about feminist theory and trace strands of feminist scholarship—including Black feminism and other feminisms—but the definition provided here applies whenever I refer to myself or my work as *feminist*.

⁵ Which has always been—simultaneously—*about* race and gender and not *just* about race and gender.

⁶ Here I bracket the full discussion of Walker's definition with appropriate page numbers, but do not include them within the paragraph as APA Style calls for. This is in part to preserve significant punctuation in the original, including more than one *periodt* (from long before they were known as such) she used for emphasis. I have also retained the italic emphasis and her capitalization from Walker's definition.

capable;” she is a woman who “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*” The final entry of the definition (pp. xi-xii) is—unfortunately, I believe—the only part most have encountered, and in it Walker declared that “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” Womanism explicitly incorporates spirituality and culture, and, for me at least, complements my grounding in Black feminism, which embraces Joy even as it delineates struggle against economic as well as social oppressions.

I make use of concepts of *identity* and *identities* throughout this dissertation. While both terms get taken up in various ways in different contexts, I define identity as an individual’s specific, complex, and multiplicitous internal understanding of who they are and, in part, who they are understood to be in social contexts⁷. An individual understanding of identity may include or be influenced by connections with and power differentials among (in no particular order) communities, relationships, lands, and histories; demographic categories created by governmental agencies and/or social science; identifications/disidentifications with one or more economic classes, social groups, values, or faith traditions; and material realities and embodied experiences. I define *identities* as a plural of identity and use it in acknowledgement of the multiplicities inherent in conceptions of identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The various descriptors that scholars have used for rhetorical performances I name as genre-fluid are wide-ranging, and I begin this literature review with a sampling of the range of terms already in use. In keeping with my own efforts to be genre-fluid in this dissertation, I begin my literature review with a collection of quotes from scholars who have used a range of other terms when they have written about what I have named genre fluidity.

The stacked introduction of terms here in the literature review in addition to those I defined for readers earlier, is deliberate; it is designed to highlight the wide range of terms that have been used to discuss

⁷ This definition of *identity*, including the expanded definition in the sentence that follows, is my own. It draws on decades of my lived experiences and 15 years of study in higher education contexts, but its articulation is influenced by the work of Daniel Tatum (2000), Lorde (1995; 2009), and Walker (1983). See also my extensive discussion of identity, in Chapter 3, as a concept within feminist, queer, and feminist- and queer-adjacent scholarship.

what I term genre fluidity. The sampling that follows underscores my argument for the use of a single term—as the variance in terminology undermines attempts to coalesce or connect scholarship. Many of these terms call to mind ideas of changing or reshaping (bending, flexibility, transformation, adaptation, innovation, reconstruction, newness), of pushing against or crossing boundaries of some kind (flouting, proliferation, departure, recontextualization, shifts, disruption), or of borrowing and reuse (uptake, combination, incorporation, juxtaposition, drawing on antecedents, interrelation, hybridity, mixing). Other terms emphasize complexity (sophistication, variation, translanguality, synthesis).

This blur of what media publishing once would have called pull quotes is a *departure* from traditional paragraphing of literature reviews, designed to *reconstruct* previous scholarship as evidence for my argument. A more recognizable literature review does follow this first section, but this *incorporation* of unadorned quotations is arranged as a litany with a call-and-response format (with specific terms rendered more legible, I hope, by the use of underlined text to highlight the terms for genre fluidity represented) is a purposeful *variation* designed for impact. These quotes are important as a collective *innovation*, and I begin the section with Tardy's call for scholarship that I try to begin answering with this dissertation project.

GENRE FLUIDITY: A LITANY

Since at least the 1990s, genre theory has cautioned us to view genres as dynamic and fluctuating.... But despite this acknowledgment—or perhaps insistence—that genres are not constraining templates, very little scholarship has directly explored how writers effectively flout or bend generic conventions.
(Tardy, 2015, p. 341, italics in original)

Flouting genre conventions is genre fluidity.

Whether it be a poem, a sonata, or a scientific study, creative products work within the boundaries of genre, bending certain conventions but by no means all.
(Tardy, 2015, p. 342)

Bending genre conventions is genre fluidity.

I first need to address the definition issue of genre innovation.... I use this phrase to refer to departures from genre convention that are perceived as effective and successful by the text's intended audience or community of practice.
(Tardy, 2015, p. 342)

Genre innovation is genre fluidity.
Departures from genre conventions are genre fluidity.

Called upon to set their own goals and to explore the variety of ways those goals might be accomplished, the work they [the writers we study] produce tends to defy any easy attempt to categorize by quality or kind. What is representative about these pieces has to do with the critical engagement and rhetorical flexibility their producers demonstrated throughout the process of accomplishing them, the sophisticated ways they were able to attend to the twinned questions of what they sought to do and why, and how, in the process of negotiating a task-based multimodal approach to composing, they began forging important connections between the classroom and other lived spaces.

(Shipka, 2005, p. 293)

Rhetorical flexibility is genre fluidity.

We might also begin asking how the purposeful uptake, transformation, incorporation, combination, juxtaposition, and even three-dimensional layering of words and visuals—as well as textures, sounds, scents, and even tastes—provide us with still other ways of imagining the work.

(Shipka, 2005, p. 278)

Purposeful uptake, transformation, incorporation, combination, and juxtaposition are genre fluidity.

Rhetors do perceive unprecedented situations through antecedent genres, that the antecedent genres chosen may not be appropriate to the situation, that severe constraints are imposed on rhetor and audience once a generic antecedent is permitted to anchor response, and that the manacles of an inappropriate genre may be broken with varying degrees of difficulty. Antecedent genres are capable of imposing powerful constraints.

(Jamieson, 1975, p. 414)

Resisting the constraints of antecedent genres is genre fluidity.

Newly created hybrid genres could emerge from the joining of two existing genres.

(Devitt, 2004, p. 151)

Genre fluidity is hybridization.

In analyzing Nalvany's blog, we also observe a hybridization of genres, or genre mixing, that is, the phenomemnon [*sic*] of several genres being mixed and used in one text, in addition to the proliferation of genres.

(Rulyova, 2015, p. 292)

Genre fluidity is mixing genres.

Genre fluidity is a proliferation of genres.

Though traceable to antecedent genres, 'new' genres usually develop to fulfill new functions in changing situations arising from changing cultures.

(Devitt, 2004, p. 93)

Genre fluidity meets new needs.

Even when change in a single genre is considered, its interactions with other genres

prove critical to how it will adapt to change.
(Devitt, 2004, p. 106)

Genre fluidity is change and adaptation.

Genres can be used as heuristics to creativity but [in addition] genres require creativity. Like variation, creativity inheres in genres.
(Devitt, 2004, p. 151)

Genre fluidity is variation.

Instead of thinking about how some uptakes involve more or less agency, a translingual perspective invites us instead to think about the agency that is always already part of all genre uptakes, from the seemingly most creative to the most conventional. This is because every genre uptake is taking place within certain asymmetrical relations of power and material, economic, and historical conditions, within and across linguistic as well as spatial and temporal locations, to achieve specific goals (which may not necessarily be the ones conditioned by the genre in use), and subject to memory, emotion, an individual's sense of self, available discursive and linguistic resources, embodied dispositions, histories of engagement, and other agentive factors that genre pedagogies tend to overlook in their focus on genres as objects, artifacts, sites, and mediational tools. Paying attention to uptake allows us to examine translingual performances in this more complex way and to recognize the interlocking systems and forces at play in performances of genre.
(Bawarshi, 2016, p. 247)

Genre fluidity is an act of translinguality.

Effective multimodal composing, like effective composing in a single—usually written—mode, is more than simply accumulating bits of information one upon the other....The goal with multimodal composition, as with composition in any single mode, is for students to practice so that they can synthesize modes, genres, ideas, and skills, and become ever more fluid and flexible composers.
(Kitalong & Miner, 2017, p. 40)

Genre fluidity is synthesis of genres.

When transfer is experienced not as application but as an act of reconstruction, both the old and new contexts—as well as what is being transferred—may be understood differently as a result.
(Nowacek, 2011, p. 23)

Genre fluidity is an act of reconstruction.

Both application and reconstruction exemplify the phenomenon of transfer, but their significant differences make it important to name and distinguish them. The term recontextualization is an umbrella term meant to encompass both types of transfer: the simpler act of application and the more complex act of reconstruction.
(Nowacek, 2011, p. 26, italics in original)

Genre fluidity is an act of recontextualization.

***Intertextuality* describes the interrelations of genres; *transfer* describes the individual act of cognition that recognizes those interrelations. An individual might recognize (however dimly) the potential for transfer because [the person] recognizes some possibility of connecting the constellation of knowledge domains, ways of knowing, identities, and goals associated with one genre and context to another.**
(Nowacek, 2011, p. 29, italics in original)

Genre fluidity constellates and connects different ways of knowing.

Noticeable disruptions in standardized genres often reflect the efforts of less-powerful groups to challenge the standards that grant only certain speakers and topics presence within a given discourse community. Other shifts in genre result from the presence of rhetors entering an unfamiliar discourse community.
(Sharer, 2003, p. 8)

Disruption and shifting are genre fluidity.

As the last of these quotes highlights, my *disruption* of the traditional literature review with a litany and call-and-response—which is from the rhetorics of ritual—is deliberate. It is one of the ways I acknowledge that my own multiplicitous identity includes being a first-generation academic: I come from a class background that in no way presaged my participation in *any* academic discourse community. It is also a nod to my background in theater and experience as a ritual leader in the Universalist tradition. Yet I am here, elbowing my way into a place that was never meant for me, bringing all of who I am into this space—and every juxtaposition of non-social science, non-academic, or non-dissertation genre moves with more traditional dissertating is a reminder that (and a reminder of why) I *am* here.

Ideas about writing strategies and rhetorical moves that I term genre fluidity—as is clear in the myriad attempts that have been made to name them—are not at all new. Indeed, what I claim as genre fluidity has been part of rhetorics at least since the time of Aristotle, whose assertion of “available means” (Rhetoric, 2010, n.p.) is a clear reference to plurality. That is, from the earliest days of the Western tradition, rhetoric has been posited as understanding that communication is inherently multiplicitous and situational. More recently, Haas (2012) has defined “rhetoric as the negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action” (p. 287). Again, the idea of rhetoric as always being contextual or situational is quite clear.

Examples of sophisticated discursive practices—as well as scholarship examining these practices—are common in multiple subaltern rhetorical traditions. Feminist rhetorics, queer rhetorics, Black rhetorics, Indigenous and Mestiza rhetorics, for example, often repurpose and rework conventional genre forms to make use of them in unconventional ways. Writers and rhetors from these rhetorical traditions have remixed, hybridized, merged, exploded, and ignored standard conventions of writing in a variety of contexts as deliberate acts. Genre fluidity, as a way of “expressing multiplicity...validates feminine experience,” and is useful for feminist rhetors because it “politicizes the nature of textuality itself” (LeCourt & Barnes, 1999, p. 322). Appropriating and remixing technologies, “from artifacts to systems,” while “retain[ing] something of the original,” is a longtime common practice in Black rhetorics that developed “in the context of the African American struggle for freedom” (Banks, 2017, n.p.). Banks called Black Twitter a contemporary example of this longstanding tradition, which he described as strategic innovation and “transmedia storytelling” (2017, n.p.). These remixing techniques—of which static and video memes are but two of the many forms to be found on Black Twitter—also represent fluid movement between multiple common genre strategies.

Likewise, inserting personal stories or other narratives as interludes or interruptions to traditional genre forms such as academic texts and technical communication documents is a genre-fluid practice found in feminist (Jung, 2005; Rallin, 2004, 2019; Small, 2017), intersectional (Del Hierro, Levy, & Price 2016; Gutiérrez y Muhs⁸, Flores Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Lorde, 1984), and Indigenous and decolonial⁹ (Ahmed, 2007; Haas, 2012; Powell, 2012; Powell, Levy, Riley-Mukavetz, Brooks-Gillies, Novotny, & Fisch-Ferguson, 2014) rhetorics—to name a few. Powell (in Powell and colleagues, 2014), claiming King (2005) as inspiration, told us this narrative-infusion form of genre fluidity has been often “alienated and marginalized”

⁸ Though APA 7 calls for the use of *et al.* [tr. *and the others*] instead of the names of authors when citing groups of three or more in paragraphed text or with parentheticals, I flout this expectation deliberately as a feminist act, to highlight the contributions of all authors. Crediting only some contributors to a project is most likely to obscure the work of marginalized and precarious scholars, and I push back against this citation practice as an effort to refrain from doing so. I use all the author names in the first mention of a group citation, regardless of size; and then for author groups larger than three I use “and colleagues” rather than *et al.* in subsequent citations of the same text, to purposely emphasize teamwork rather than hierarchy.

⁹ *Decolonial* as a modifier refers to Indigenous-led scholarship and activism that overtly de-centers Western/colonial/Eurocentric knowledge- and meaning-making, and especially rejects the false premise that Western/European/Global-Northern ideas, traditions, and practices are superior to other traditions. *Decolonial rhetorics* de-center Western rhetorical texts, scholars, and practices that arise from/within Western hegemony, including (but certainly not limited to) white nationalism and white supremacy. While I attempt to practice this decentering as much as I am able to do so, I do not describe myself or my work as decolonial because I do not have an Indigenous cultural legacy or tribal affiliation.

or “tokenized as a ‘special’ or ‘alternative’ discourse and quickly set off from what ‘really’ counts” (p. 403). In her challenge to rhetoric scholars—including in writing studies, composition, and business, professional, and technical communication—she strongly advocated for centering this kind of genre fluidity instead, as a way of building a “knowledge world” that includes multiple voices and multiple stories:

We could change our beliefs about the breadth of what counts in our discipline. So let’s do it. Let’s tell different kinds of stories. Let’s do the thing that we do best—research, teach, mentor, administer in all the inventive and visionary ways that we all say we know how to do better than anybody else. (Powell, in Powell and colleagues, 2014, p. 403)

Including narratives as storytelling, like other forms of genre fluidity, is a rhetorical performance that makes use of multiple strategies—and as Powell made clear, “inventive and visionary” work is central to rhetoric. Similar in some ways to the call from Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) to examine simultaneous antenarrative threads within technical communication scholarship and Ratcliff’s (2005) call for rhetorical listening as a way to hear and learn from the experiences of different people, understanding rhetoric as always fluid and multiplicitous—and therefore a site of genre fluidity—makes for an embrace of possibility and complexity in storytelling as rhetorical performance.

Rhetorical Genre Studies. In rhetorical genre studies, or RGS, there is broad recognition that rhetorical contexts, like some components of identity, can be fluid (Devitt, 2004; Miller 1984; Tardy 2015; for example). Audiences and purposes may change in tandem or at different moments, and there are times when a purpose can be best achieved—or a function be effectively enacted—by addressing multiple audiences and employing a range of genre forms. According to Schryer (2000), genre acts are “regulated, improvisational” and “flexible sets of recurring practices” (p. 450); they are “strategies” rather than “rules and conventions” (p. 451). Choosing genre-fluid strategies means using multiple sets of practices, or improvising by combining multiple genre practices.

With this section of the literature review, I thread together work in RGS—including its significant overlap with technical communication—as a way of situating genre fluidity within the larger discipline of rhetoric. Primarily, I draw on Miller’s insistence on limiting the use of the term genre to discursive rhetorical practice rather than format or form, and on Devitt’s analysis of genre forms as potential catalysts for creative adaptation, reinterpretation, and expansion of those forms. Following Miller, my distinguishing between

genre as a contextual act by a rhetor—versus genre as a text created by the act of a rhetor—is made obvious by frequent use of *genre form* rather than *genre* to distinguish references to texts (or nouns), produced by rhetorical acts, from my much more frequent references to the act of communicating (or verb). To put it another way, *genre* can be thought of, perhaps, as a verb, and a genre form could be termed a noun. In this metaphor, a genre-fluid writer is the one who is continually ‘verbing with nouns’ rather than calcifying into a practice of repeatedly ‘verbing with the same noun.’

Another brief glance back into the history of Western rhetoric finds Erasmus, in *On Copia*, urging writers and speakers to be flexible in their rhetorical strategies, to be “prepared to turn the same thought into many forms” (1999, sec. VIII) so that they are less likely to be in a high-stakes rhetorical context and “find [them]selves either confused, or crude, or even silent” (sec. VIII). This idea suggests a genre-fluid approach potentially equips activist-writers with more language-based tools to drive social change as well as providing avenues to oppose inequity in multiple contexts. One pass through his text’s compilation of—literally—two hundred ways to frame the same idea in sentence form makes it clear that the idea of fluid adaptability in writing is not a twenty-first-century concept. The general idea that adaptability is important because contexts are ever-changing, however, is an evergreen concern of rhetoric.

Often, according to Jamieson (1975), when faced with an unfamiliar rhetorical context¹⁰, “a rhetor will draw on [their] past experiences and on genres formed by others” (p. 408). This can adversely complicate the work of writers who may select “antecedent genres” that set up “severe constraints” only to find “that the manacles of an inappropriate genre may be broken with varying degrees of difficulty” (Jamieson, 1975, p. 414). Jamieson’s analysis suggested that rhetorical choices are not always consciously or freely made, and that a

¹⁰ Note that Kohrs Campbell, Jamieson, Miller, Devitt, and other scholars make use of Lloyd Bitzer’s term, *rhetorical situation*, as well as related language (*exigence*, *constraints*), without necessarily subscribing to his objectivist approach. Indeed, Miller (1984; 2015) in particular seems to align more closely with Richard Vatz’s (1973) assertion that rhetorical agency belongs to the rhetor. Here’s the shorthand version: Bitzer (1968) defined rhetorical situation “as a complex of person, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence” made up of an *exigence*, or a demand for action, as well as an “*audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (p. 6). Responding to this view, which is generally understood to construct situations as precursors to rhetorical acts, Vatz (1973) argued that rhetors create situations by assigning value to selected exigencies: “rhetoric is a *cause* not an *effect* of meaning” (p. 160). For the full original discourse, see Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” (1968) and Vatz’s “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” (1973). See Kohrs Campbell & Hall Jamieson (1978) for a discussion of the disciplinary background that preceded Bitzer’s work. I specifically use *rhetorical context* instead, highlighting a broader understanding of the places rhetors find—and choose to put—themselves and choose to participate in discourse. I also draw on these later feminist scholars (who of course studied Bitzer and others) as my primary sources because their work with these ideas is what has relevance for mine.

certain amount of rhetorical sophistication—or, some might say, untutored obliviousness—may be required to successfully adapt or reject antecedent genre forms.

Drawing on Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson (1978), Miller (1984) argued that genres are socially situated, “based on rhetorical practice” and “organized around situated actions” (p. 155). Typified genres develop from typical situations, Miller asserted, and new genre types arise when “typifications already on hand” (p. 157) are no longer adequate for a new or changed rhetorical context. While a term such as “typification” might seem to lend itself to a discussion of genre forms rather than to the action of a writer, a strategic response—which may not be a conventional form or format—to a specific rhetorical context can be typified just as easily. Once that new type of genre, or response, becomes common and enters “the stock of knowledge”—when it “proves continually useful” (p. 157), as Miller has pointed out—then this typical response may endure over time. Clearly, new or altered generic responses develop when a typified response is no longer as useful, but there can be many other reasons for a writer to respond to a rhetorical context in a different way. For instance, new types of genre responses may also come into existence when a rhetor is unaware of that common knowledge or typical response; likewise, a rhetor may deliberately reject the generally accepted knowledge for a variety of reasons, such as the intention to respond to a typical recurring rhetorical context in atypical ways. Returning to the verbing-with-noun metaphor, writers with very different vocabularies may verb with specific nouns because these are the nouns they know, the nouns that have meaning for them. Writers also may put aside a common noun when they are verbing—or repurpose a noun that is more common in other verbing contexts—because they are trying to accomplish something very different, such as to shock, delight, disturb, or provoke readers.

Miller (1984) drew on Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamison again for her discussion of the “fusion of substance and form” which makes articulating differences between genres and genre forms so difficult to tease out:

Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way. Seen thus, form becomes a kind of meta-formation.... Form and substance thus bear a hierarchical relationship to each other. (p. 159)

Put another way, genre forms may constrain but can become a sort of shorthand for writers to use to signal readers that the writers are responding to a rhetorical context in a typified way. When “motive becomes a conventionalized social purpose, or exigence, within the recurrent situation” (Miller, 1984, p. 162), then the genre form may be equally conventionalized. Overall, Miller called for an “understanding of rhetorical genre [that] is based in rhetorical practice, in the conventions of discourse” (p. 163), and she carefully articulated four features of this understanding:

- (1) Genre is “a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action [and it] acquires meaning from situation and from the social context”;
- (2) Genre is “meaningful action [and] is interpretable by means of rules”;
- (3) “Genre is distinct from form” although forms can sometimes fuse with “characteristic substance”; and
- (4) Genre exists as “a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence” and it “connect[s] the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (Miller, 1984, p. 163).

These features represent a framework that is useful for writers of many kinds and at different levels.

According to Miller, these features have “implications not only for criticism and theory” (p. 165), but also for activist-writers, since “genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (p. 165), and for other writers. While a clear grasp of these genre features may not be required for writers to accomplish unconventional genre-fluid responses to conventional or typified rhetorical contexts, or for writers to respond to the same exigence in various idiosyncratic ways, a deep understanding of these features can lend itself to a more sophisticated flouting of genre conventions.

Devitt (2004) sought to “clarify where genre theory [stood]” then, 20 years after Miller’s canonical work, and then extended genre theory with a book intended to “elaborate[e] a comprehensive theory of genre” (p. 2-3). Her summary of the history of RGS outlined the significance of the work by Bakhtin, Burke, Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson, and Miller. Devitt also expressed a desire to “provoke new questions, not supply all the answers” (p. 3). In her discussion of rhetorical genre theory, Devitt stated that “in cases where writers and readers are violating, challenging, or changing the connection of a genre to a situation” (p. 23) much becomes clear. Grounding a segment of her discussion of the history of genre in business communication, Devitt demonstrated that genre forms change over time as a result of individual choices as well as situational dynamics and that they do so in unpredictable ways (p. 110-112). Most importantly, she

called for “pedagogical strategies that keep generic form and generic contexts united” so that students can “discover that genres allow a range of choices” and that “creativity and variation is possible within existing genres” (p. 200). For scholarship on genre-fluid writers, Devitt’s most important contribution in this text is the attention her work gave to creativity in the context of genre conventions, in her Creative Boundaries chapter, where she claimed that a commonality of genre expectations “both constrains and enables writers” as they compose:

What if a writer has never written or read a lab report before and does not know what is expected? What if the writer does not want to reach the audience in the expected way? What if the writer does not want to accomplish the assumed goals but...to subvert the conformity required? (Devitt, p. 138)

In the same chapter, Devitt paralleled language variation and typification with adaptations and standardizations of genre forms and drew on creativity studies scholarship to “argue that meaning is enhanced by both choice and constraint” (p. 150). She cited Rothenberg’s Janusian thinking and Koestler’s claim that creativity comes from “bisociation,” or “two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” (qtd. in Devitt, 2004, p. 151) to make her argument that “the duality of creativity” is not only useful, but also required for genre standardization and variance (p. 151). The obvious connection between these ideas and the concept of double voice, from Black rhetorics—where creative strategies flourished in response to harsh, dangerous constraints—is important. Almost all outsider groups contending with oppressive constraints can call on creative strategies of recontextualization and repurposing to engage in the unexpected, to write genres as a way to “subvert the conformity required” (Devitt, 2004, p. 138).

Beginning with Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of legitimacy in a marketplace, Tardy noted that “many examples of innovation in academic writing come from authors who have already established their linguistic and disciplinary competence and who hold relatively high status within their field” who can thus “exchange their accumulated capital for the right to depart from dominant norms” (p. 344) in that field. Tardy (2015) also drew on creativity studies’ collective suggestion that “a product is creative when it is both *novel* and *appropriate*” (p. 355, italics in original) to recognize when “norm-departures” are considered “innovative rather than deviant or unsuccessful. In other words,” she continued, “the object is recognizable as belonging to the appropriate genre... A creative text offers something new, something that allows it to stand out, to surprise

the reader but in a way that the reader values” (p. 355). Tardy claimed a “sociocultural and systems-based orientation” (p. 358) emphasized genre innovation is as much something evaluated by readers as it is something a writer engages in. This analysis revealed the reader’s “perceptions of [the writer’s] genre knowledge” (p. 358) to be key to whether genre fluidity is judged to be an innovation or to be an error. She concluded that “understanding the possibilities and cautions of genre innovation is a timely and worthwhile endeavor” (p. 360).

The lack of systemic focus on genre fluidity, which this dissertation seeks to redress, is a curiosity, because in contemporary RGS there is at least a relative consensus acknowledging that genres and genre forms are ever-evolving or adapting—rather than calcifying—and that therefore conventions of genre are never fully conventional. It is also interesting, in view of Tardy’s suggestion that theory should precede pedagogy, that teaching of genre-fluid strategies and related concepts has already made some headway in the classroom. Approaches vary quite a bit, but include multi-genre research and the use of commonplace books (Carbone, 2010; Dickson, DeGraff, & Foard, 2002), crystallization and post-structural feminist methodologies (Ellingson, 2002), using genre to teach academic literacy (Hyland, 2008), teaching with intermediate genres created through uptake (Tachino, 2012), and the use of digital tutorial tools (Lo, Liu, & Wang, 2014), for example. Analysis of these various pedagogical iterations needs to be done, and more theoretical work is also required to redress this lack.

Writing Transfer Studies. This next section of my literature review explores transfer scholarship in writing studies. Writing studies scholarship focused on *transfer*—“the phenomenon in which new and unfamiliar writing tasks are approached through the application, remixing, or integration of previous knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions” (Elon Research Seminar, 2015, p. 7)—is a focus here because genre-fluid strategies align in some ways with how (and whether) transfer is accomplished. While writing studies, including transfer scholarship, is often closely aligned with composition pedagogy scholarship, the knowledge gained about genre fluidity from research can have a broader applicability for writers and writing, beyond first-year writing and beyond college classrooms.

In writing studies, engagement with social and economic justice and with identity are important—further connecting with my work in this dissertation and with the work of the activist-writers at the center of this project. Wallace (2009), for example, identified a “need to actively develop alternative rhetorics that take as their central task the identification and unseating of inequities” (p. 34) and Kitalong and Minor (2017) examined multimodal composing as a strategy that “encourages and develops agency” (p. 40). Kramarae’s (1989/2004) work in feminist communication theory and the feminist composition scholarship of LeCourt and Barnes (1999) were early examples of how rhetoric and composition engaged—at least at the margins—with gender-related social justice issues, and how multiplicitous identity is connected to writing. Since then, Gonçalves (2005) and Wallace (2009) focused on sexuality and queer identity in writing pedagogy, expanding that lens of identity. Ahmed (2006) examined sexuality, gender, and national identity; Ahmed (2006) and other scholars (for example: Ratcliff, 2005; Jones Royster & Kirsch, 2012) have written extensively about race and drawn on critical race studies for critiques and revisioning of rhetorical work.

Anis Bawarshi’s (2016) survey of writing studies scholarship described genre forms as “socially derived, intersubjective, rhetorical typifications that help us recognize and act within recurrent situations” (p. 243) and rejected the existence of “dichotomies between norm and difference, convention and creativity” (p. 245). Critiquing the “preoccupation with genre as sites of access” (p. 244) as less than useful, Bawarshi (2016) proposed thinking of genre difference as simply the way things are—asserting genre-fluid strategies are not truly “a deviation from a patterned or recurrent norm, but...the norm of all genre performance” (p. 244). Reiff and Bawarshi’s (2011) scholarship on genre-fluid “boundary crossers” who succeed at transfer in the writing classroom, referenced earlier in this chapter, also demonstrated how uncertainty and disruption prompt breaks from genre rules, allowing a focus on strategies that can be recontextualized. Rounsaville (2012) advocated for writing instruction as a “gate-opening function” rather than a “gate-keeping” one. Jung’s (2005) extensive work on multi-genre texts described this kind of writing as “revisionary” as well as feminist, and claimed genre-fluid practices as central to writing and the pedagogy of rhetoric and composition, highlighting how these concepts have broader application in writing studies.

More writing studies scholarship has made similar points about how grappling with genre concepts can shape the work writers do. For example, Correa (2010) drew on the perspectives and interactions of one writer teaching writing to another in a case study that detailed how different ways of using the same language can seem to defy ‘translation.’ While this study was also from the classroom, it provides insight with utility elsewhere.

A PEEK INTO A CASE STUDY

Correa (2010) focused on an adult student with little prior formal education and an inexperienced teaching assistant in their first appointment. This case study illustrates how identity and belonging/not-belonging are critical for writers across contexts. While “Maria” (the student pseudonym used in the study) spoke and wrote fluently in English, and was already more than a quarter of the way through her degree program, a series of essay assignments requiring sourced arguments proved a challenge for everyone involved.

In her first essay about Spanish-language media, Maria drew heavily on published sources to support her argument and then received negative feedback for not ‘owning’ her position on the topic, since very little of the quote- and summary-heavy essay reflected her own stated opinion. While the writing instructor’s approach valued marshalling credible sources to *support* an essay writer’s articulated argument, Maria, in that moment, viewed published writers as experts in ways she was not. Therefore, the work of experts who argued for Maria’s position was presented *as* the argument.

In a second essay draft, Maria attempted to enact her understanding of this new (to her) genre form of argumentative writing by presenting her personal position clearly, without reliance on outside sources. The resulting assessment included more negative feedback and generated more frustration for the instructor and the student. It took several more attempts at the new genre form before Maria’s ability to draw on both her knowledge of how to state her own opinions and of how to draw on expert sources for additional support could be combined to effectively showcase her grasp of the expected conventions.

Correa, as a writing facilitator for the degree program, described her own inability to assist Maria or the instructor as a lack worthy of further investigation. “I thought of both academic writing and conventions for attribution of voice as fixed sets of rules that needed to be mastered,” Correa wrote, “and that once mastered, one could apply to every piece of academic writing one produced” (p. 91). This common misunderstanding often inhibits the development of writing skills. Corea illustrated misconceptions that both writers had, and the case study encapsulated some of the ideas about writerly identity and voice which feature prominently in my project.

Hollander (2010) described three case studies focused on students from a first-year basic writing course, addressing the idea of a “sponsoring discourse” (p. 30) and claiming that newer writers need a personal connection to some kind of scholarly conversation in order to develop writing identities.

Hollander’s study was designed to examine how these identities appeared in or impacted writing. Using

critical discourse analysis, which she describes as “a type of microanalysis of language” (p. 33), Hollander identified several class-based issues that many first-generation students deal with in academic settings. This sponsorship concept is an important one that has real implications for this identity-based dissertation project.

Nowacek (2011) used activity theory and rhetorical genre theory to articulate a model of transfer for writers, and latitudinal project was the basis for outlining five principles. Transfer, she wrote:

- (a) includes “multiple avenues of connection among contexts” (p. 20);
- (b) is “reconstruction” work (p. 23);
- (c) can be negative as well as positive;
- (d) works through spoken and written intertextuality; and
- (e) does not require meta-awareness.

In Nowacek’s analysis, the goal was understanding “circumstances that enable [writers] to become agents of intentional and successful integration” (p. 34). This speaks to situatedness, whether conscious or not, as influential in transfer.

To balance significant transfer research about what writers take with them *out* of first-year composition (FYC), Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) examined what writing genre knowledge students bring with them *into* FYC. They focused on discursive resources that students from a range of backgrounds can draw on to successfully negotiate new writing contexts: building on previous scholarship that identified issues related to student perceptions of themselves as novice or expert writers, and drawing on genre studies scholarship for their analysis. By coding the responses to both surveys and interviews based on words and phrases from the respondents and applying discourse analysis, Reiff and Bawarshi discovered that both writing genre forms and writing strategies (what I have described earlier in this chapter as linguistic modes) were often named as prior knowledge, and that many of the same strategies and an ease with genre forms were named as helpful.

They also described how writers who focus on firm genre distinctions in writing, termed “boundary guarders,” were less likely to recontextualize writing skills than “boundary crossers” (p. 325) who focus on strategies across genre forms rather than on adhering to specific genre expectations. The latter group, the boundary crossers, applied what I have named as genre-fluid strategies to their work. Reiff and Bawarshi

noted writers with a “willingness to deploy, transform, and even abandon existing discursive resources” and who were “comfort[able] with reformulating and transforming existing resources” were also more likely to succeed at transfer (p. 330). This research points to writers who have some knowledge and are willing to try a different way of writing; these writers are more likely to be able to transfer well, especially in comparison to those who feel they know nothing *and* to those who feel like they already know how to write.

Writing studies scholars—particularly in transfer—have done a significant amount of work that lays out tools and strategies for writers, researchers, and writing instructors interested in social justice and in centering marginalized communities and perspectives. Like others in the broader field of rhetoric, these scholars offered significant insight and strategies for any rhetoricians who want to engage in work that foregrounds multiplicitous identities while furthering social and economic justice.

More recent work—which often blends these disciplines and explicitly embraces technological tools—includes that of emerging scholars with a wide range of claimed identities and embodied perspectives and paints a bright picture of possibilities in the field moving forward. For example, Cedillo (2017) delineated how technology and “home place” shape multimodal work by rhetoricians from diverse communities, Kitalong & Minor (2017) emphasized “personal agency” via multimodal rhetorical work, and Alvarez, Baumann, Day, Echols, Gordon, Kumari, Sceniak, Matravers, Newman, McCleese Nichols, Ray, Udelson, Wysocki, and DeVoss (2017) examined identity and agency in multimodal composition. All of this work has raised an expectation that social justice be part of the work of the discipline of rhetoric. This rhetorical scholarship has been an inspiration for me as I have been engaged in this dissertation project.

I have also been inspired and influenced by the work of business, professional, and technical communication scholars who focus on social and economic justice as a central component of their rhetorical work. While understanding identity as multifaceted does not directly translate to social and economic justice commitments, individuals with multiple marginalizing identities are potentially the least served by a pretence that writing is a disembodied act with no connection to identity.

One text in particular which explicitly addresses the connection between identity and communication is Jones, Moore, and Walton’s (2016) article, mentioned earlier in this chapter. These scholars stated their

intention was to collect the varied (and, they rightly said, scant) threads of scholarship in technical communication which constitute an antenarrative—challenging the dominant narrative in technical communication that, like so much of academia and the larger culture, privileges the idea of hetero-normative white Western masculinity as what technical communicators and the work of technical communication look like. Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) drew on critical race scholarship and feminist scholarship in particular to make the case for intertwining these antenarratives to create stronger intersectional threads of socially just scholarship in technical communication. To a lesser extent, these scholars also drew on intercultural studies, disability studies work, and queer scholarship in tech comm as well; and Jones, Moore, and Walton noted that these threads from cultural studies, disability studies, and queer studies are even thinner than that of work to date on race and gender. In another article, Jones (2016a) again made this argument for addressing social justice in technical communication by writing on human-centered design, silence, and voice.

Writing about race and rhetoric in technical communication, Haas (2012) also argued for the use of decolonial theory, methods, and teaching in the field. Wills (2006) and Savage (2004) are two more scholars in technical communication who are part of this shift away from a narrow understanding of rhetoric. Insisting on cultural studies approaches to teaching technical writing, as Wills (2006) and others have, encouraged the field to understand itself as embedded in rather than separate from the culture (and cultures) that technology and tech comm originate in. Savage (2004) called on technical communicators to draw on liminal identity perspectives as sources of strength and of sophisticated rhetorical strategies—situating marginalized and multiple identities as essential to the work of technical and professional communication.

My work here—threading together a literature review from rhetorical genre studies, writing studies, and a swath of adjacent scholarship—attempts to model what these scholars have been doing when they pulled from and connected a range of scholarship threads to focus on research projects and concepts with broad rather than narrow applicability. Indeed, business and professional communication (my sub-disciplinary home) can benefit from rhetoric scholarship in genre studies and in writing studies, and will be significantly enriched by the research insights these adjacent fields offer.

CHAPTER WRAP-UP

Rhetorical genre studies and writing studies are important to the larger field of rhetoric—which I view as the mother discipline—and they offer scholarship that strongly informs business, professional, and technical communication. All can, I believe, be enriched by a deeper understanding of genre fluidity—which, in turn, has utility in all these disciplinary discourses. This introductory chapter has discussed genre fluidity and provided definitions, terms, and concepts as well as a relevant literature review. The chapters that follow describe and analyze the work of genre-fluid writers; detail the theories, methodologies, and contexts that frame my project; describe my research methods and present my data; and discuss the analysis and conclusions based on my findings.

In Chapter 2, I examine the work of Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Walker, providing a critical discussion of their respective bodies of work. This chapter includes explication, critical analysis, and discussion of how each of these writers connect identity and context to their work, and provides examples of how these writers exemplify genre fluidity.

In Chapter 3, I write extensively about the theories and methodologies that have shaped this research, and detail the social, economic, and geographical context of the project. Drawing on identity theory, queer theory, feminist rhetorical theory, and intersectionality theory, I connect identity, embodiment, and both social and geographic location to the work that writers do—as writing is a contextual, culturally-situated practice. Aligning with Creswell’s (2009) assertion that narrative and phenomenological approaches in qualitative research are both methods and methodologies, I have included methodologies and the resulting methods as well as theory in this next chapter. Chapter 3 also connects my epistemologies and my stance as a researcher with the methodologies and methods I employ in this dissertation project.

Further, Chapter 3 outlines each step in the management of my project, which focused on writers in a community writing group formed as part of the study. The participants recruited were activists who did not necessarily claim a writerly identity, but who were activists within the local community focused on social and economic justice. Writers met with me individually for interviews and met with each other as part of the group, discussing the writing work they were doing. My data collection consisted primarily of interviews of

writer-participants and selectively recording some conversations from meetings of the writing group. My third chapter details the mechanics of my research project, including recruitment, organization, data collection, coding processes, and the corresponding social justice commitments that shaped my research methods. The project was participatory and phenomenological, and the next chapter details the case study, phenomenological, and narrative methods used to collect and examine the qualitative data. Chapter 3 focuses on the care and precision I used in crafting my research methods, as the focus of the data collection was on the experiences and stories of the research participants.

In Chapter 4, I provide background and context for the community where the writers who participated in this study live and work. Contextual details included relate to the social and economic justice issues members of the writing group were engaged in addressing, and to the day-to-day barriers they deal with because of the identities they embody, or both. Following that discussion, Chapter 5 provides an in-depth focus on each of the writing group participants, written as a series of case study profiles. In keeping with my commitment to participant-centered research, the words of participants are featured prominently in each case study. On Chapter 6, I focus on the writing group in a collective way, presenting discussions from the writing group meetings where writers, in pairs or groups of three or four, met to talk about writing, identity, and their writing activism.

Chapter 7 is my findings and conclusions chapter. This chapter includes analysis of my findings: conclusions about genre fluidity, implications for the field(s) of rhetoric and writing, and suggestions for further study. My inductive analysis focused on patterns of genre fluidity in the data and on themes of identity that were evident in the interview responses and contributions to group conversations from participants. The final chapter discusses the genre-fluid writing strategies of study participants and makes connections with both the genre-fluid strategies defined in this first chapter.

CHAPTER 2—GENRE-FLUID WRITERS: AUDRE LORDE, GLORIA ANZALDÚA, AND ALICE WALKER

Following my framing of terms and concepts—*genre* and *genre forms*, *writing* and *writers*, *rhetoric(s)* and *rhetors*, *performance*, *queer* and *feminist*—in Chapter 1, I turn to the work of three writers whose strategies and texts can illuminate an understanding of genre fluidity: Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Alice Walker. To reference my two-part definition of genre fluidity—employing multiple texts in multiple genre forms for one purpose, or combining and reshaping multiple genre conventions within a single text—Lorde’s work was genre-fluid in both ways; Walker and Anzaldúa have exemplified multiple-genre and mixed-genre forms of genre fluidity respectively. And while these writers are often studied as literary creatives or theoretical scholars, their work is examined here because they are skilled genre-fluid practitioners. They are *rhetoricians* who are also—among the multiple writerly hats they wear—critical theorists and literary writers. Analysis of the genre-fluid rhetorical strategies used by Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Walker has much value for rhetorical disciplines, including writing studies, communication studies, and business, professional, and technical communication. Understanding genre fluidity as a comprehensive strategy for writers can allow for new approaches to purpose-driven writing in cultural rhetorics, and can allow for additional framing and connections across sub-disciplines when studying the work of rhetoricians.

AUDRE LORDE

An activist and academic, Lorde was a writer whose body of work exemplifies both forms of genre fluidity. She wrote theory, essays, academic articles, speeches, autobiography, memoir, poetry and more—including creative work using multiple and mixed use of conventional genre forms. This use of multiple genre

forms enabled her to write for a range of audiences with her overall message, which involved calling out inequity and oppression while advocating for positive societal change. Her writing in various genre formats, with a single thematic focus, was the basis for her theoretical work (Bereano, 1983). Perhaps best-known as a poet, or for her often-misappropriated and often-misunderstood phrase “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (1984, p. 112, italics in original), Lorde’s richly complex writing can be studied as examples of both strategies of genre fluidity, revealing her as so much more than a poet who could turn a phrase. Her expansive body of work is varied, yet focused on a cohesive message, and I outline these connections to illustrate how writers who practice genre-fluid strategies can reach multiple audiences in multiple ways.

A DIGRESSION ABOUT TOOLS

In some ways, continued misunderstanding of the best-known line from all of Lorde’s genre-fluid writing is ironic, as her metaphor highlights a paucity of connections across differences. This is especially true because one through-line of my argument in this dissertation is the claim that acknowledgement of commonalities and connections across genre boundaries is a powerful tool.

Many people in and out of the academy understand “the master’s tools” to be practices often associated with uplift or respectability politics (and, indeed, my own early understanding of the concept lacked the context needed to grasp this is not what she meant). The practices sometimes thought of as “the master’s tools” are those of respectability politics, and are sometimes falsely associated with whiteness: earning degrees, pursuing professional careers, entrepreneurship and investing, union organizing, feminism, LGBTQ+ civil rights, and running for political office. This misunderstanding can result in a rejection of highly effective strategies that could be employed for social justice work, and may inhibit some connections with co-conspirators, allies and potential allies who could be partners in coalition work toward “dismantl[ing] the master’s house.”

Those tools are worth thinking about, but Lorde was making a different point. The “master’s tools” line came in an essay where she was writing about divisions and exclusions within feminism and the discipline of feminist theory:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older [are the ones who] know that *survival is not an academic skill*.... [Survival is learning] how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures...[and] learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (p. 112, italics in original)

Primarily, she was naming divide-and-conquer strategies—specifically within the (white, second-wave) feminist movement—as the tools of the master, and claiming that “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (p. 112). In this statement, like in much of her academic work, the focus was on destructive divisions created and reinforced, especially between white women and women of color, between straight and queer women, and between people of different economic classes. She saw these divisions as long-term deliberate tools used to maintain oppressive institutions and to control systems of power.

According to Lorde, “genuine change” can only come from “mak[ing] common cause with others” (p.112). As a rhetorician who frequently described herself as a warrior woman poet, and who was committed to social justice, she embraced the strategic use of many available means for empowerment—while insisting that using the master’s tools of division would continue to marginalize many, many people.

Whether writing essays, journal articles, feminist theory, poetry, or other genre forms, Lorde was effectively writing about oppressions and their direct impacts. The 15 pieces in her influential *Sister Outsider*, which was billed as a collection of essays and speeches, also included travel journal entries, academic papers, an open letter, and an edited interview transcript. According to one of the editors on that project, Lorde “informed me, as we were working one afternoon, that she doesn’t write theory. ‘I am a poet,’ she said” (Bereano, 1983, p. 7). Yet Lorde’s prose in *Sister Outsider*, Bereano continued, “makes absolutely clear to many what some already knew: Audre Lorde’s voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory. She is at the cutting edge of consciousness” (p. 7). This merging of poetry and theory is a hallmark of Lorde’s genre-fluid work, which Bereano described this way:

We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist’s mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced “subjectively,” and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the “objective” world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them.

The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think—between poetry and theory. We are easier to control when one part of our selves [*ji*] is split from another, fragmented, off balance. There are other configurations, however, other ways of experiencing the world, though they are often difficult to name. We can sense them and seek their articulation. Because it is the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions, *Sister Outsider* is a reason for hope. (Bereano, 1983, p. 8)

Lorde saw her poetry as a bridge that made prose, including academic work, possible (1984/1993b).

Describing “poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience,” she wrote that poetry “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” and becomes “sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas” (p. 17). According to Lorde, poetry can be the first draft of activism:

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry

is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (1984/1993b, pp. 37-38).

“Dreams are made realizable through our poems,” Lorde asserted, because they “give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (p. 39). In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss three of her poems as examples of this seeing, feeling, speaking, and daring.

As a poet, one oppression Lorde addressed was systemic violence of in the name of religion. In “Peace on Earth,” a poem with an epigraph that read “Christmas 1989,” she imagined a television montage for the winter holiday season that year. Lorde (1994) first painted images of a young Jewish girl in Poland and an elderly Christian woman in Lithuania—both Eastern European countries newly broken away from the Soviet Bloc—then juxtaposed an image of Sinti-Roma people who had been excluded from the then-fledgling democratic process in Romania (p. 39). Lorde’s poetic “screen,” which appeared while filled with peaceful images of European people, shifted quickly in the second stanza to other parts of the world where things were very different:

Before the flickering screen
goes dead rows of erupting houses
the rockets’ red glare where
are all these brown children
running scrambling around the globe
flames through the rubble
bombs bursting in air
Panama Nablus Gaza
tear gas clouding the Natal sun. (p. 39)

Lorde’s use of distinctly recognizable war-related phrases from the national anthem of the United States was explicit here—driving home her protest of U.S. military involvement in Central American and Middle Eastern conflicts during that time period. And, by completing the poem with another peaceful holiday image (this time from the pre-Christian traditions of Scandinavia), Lorde bookended the violence at the center of her poem in a way that created additional emphasis, describing “the crackling Yule log / in an iron grate” (p. 39).

With poetry, “those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us,” Lorde wrote (1984/1993b, p. 36). Apartheid in South Africa was the focus of her poems “Party Time” and “Prism” (1994), which also address oppressive violence she was unafraid to speak about. “Party Time” is powerful in part because of the matter-of-fact way horrific incidents are presented. How could we not

respond to “grandchildren playing hide and seek / riddled with bullets behind a silk-cotton tree” (p. 11)? Lorde continued with “just two more funerals in Soweto” (p. 11), raising an image that is difficult to erase. Her fragmented, evocative style of writing used here, focusing briefly on intimate details, served as a strong voice for the plight of people she depicted. For example, consider these lines from “Party Time,” which read:

behind the small coffins
Lillian’s son-in-law drags his feet
achilles tendons shredded by police dogs (p. 11)

These spare, descriptive lines created indelible images, lending momentum to her protest against race-based political violence. In “Prism,” the detail is gone, but the strong imagery is still at the forefront. Her opening line, “There are no frogs in Soweto” (p. 13) begins a rhythm that echoes for three stanzas. “Not true no,” she began stanza two—contradicting her first line—“frogs live in Soweto;” then continued, writing “only we are too weary / with no ears left to hear them” (p. 13). The third stanza rolled on:

Who knows where frogs live in Soweto
who has time to listen...
beyond the flames of evening
rising falling
the thin high screams
of skewered children. (p. 13)

This graphic depiction and its visceral impact was not about describing something readers were not already aware of. After all, wrote Lorde, “there are no new pains. We have felt them all already”:

There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt...while we suffer the old longing, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths. (1984/1993b, p. 39).

As a poet who lived the United States, she was well aware the parallels between apartheid and Black oppression in the U.S. Her use of poetry—along with essays, speeches, theory, and other forms of prose—to illustrate, narrate, articulate, and protest against oppressions is exactly the strategy I have identified as the first of two forms of genre fluidity.

Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982/1993a) is an example of the second form of genre-fluid writing; it is a single text but it incorporated multiple conventional genre forms. Smith (1991) described it as a genre-spanning and “essentially autobiographical work, but the poet’s eye, ear, and tongue give the work stylistic richness often associated with well-crafted fiction” (p. 122). *Zami* blended memoir and

autobiography with history and mythology, including in some sections where Lorde's first-person narrator described life in small-town Grenada, in Harlem, and in Mexico City, among other locations. The attention to various spaces and places was a theme that Lorde returned to again and again (Alexander, 1994; Giroux, 2009; Milatovic, 2015; Moy, 2014) in this sprawling work that spanned and meshed narrative and creative genres. *Zami* is also "a heavily documented memoir or public performance" (Stone, 1993, p. 187) and "a conglomeration of many varied identifications and identities" (Moy, 2014, p. 189). *Zami's* subtitle overtly indicated Lorde's adoption of a new name from the Grenadian dialect of her mother's people. "*Zami*" was her reclaiming of a Caribbean slur used to describe a lesbian¹¹. Lorde wrote of *zami* as women who worked together, survived together, loved each other, and were legends of strength and beauty (1982/1993b, pp. 13-14, 255). This choice of a new name was deliberate, wrote Moy (2014), and it "immediately" clued readers that Lorde was "embracing change," using words to "creat[e] a new identity" (2014, p. 180).

Zami interspersed song lyrics, prayers, poems, dreams, and visions into the narrative, "merging the sensual, mythological, personal and political" (Milatovic, 2015, para. 4). Lorde (1982/1993a) herself described the book as "dreams/myths/histories" (p. i) and as her "body, a living representation of other life[,] older longer wiser¹²" (p. 7). Elsewhere Lorde wrote "I have always felt that I cannot be categorized" (2009, p. 161), so the statement that *Zami* intentionally represented her was in some ways quite literal. It "name[d] a new genre, creating a larger space for her myriad selves" and "ma[de] a physical space for herself in a hybrid language, a composite, a creation of new language to make space for the 'new' of the self-invented body" (Alexander, 1994, p. 696). All of these other elements weave in and out of stories from her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, where Lorde mixes the dreams and visions with tiny vignettes, critical moments, and conversations that both shaped her values and her understanding of components of her identity.

¹¹ See Moy (2014) for a more detailed discussion of the meaning of *zami*, which is a loose adaptation of *les amies* (tr. *the friends*).

¹² Extra spaces in this sentence are as they appear the original. And I inserted a comma rather than a (/) to indicate a line break in the original because this quote comes from paragraphed text, and it is unclear whether or not Lorde intended a poetry-style line break before "older."

One story recounts a conversation between six-year-old Audre and her sisters about racial identity, where she had heard them use the term “Colored ” (pp. 58-59). She asked them what they meant by the word, and they said they did not know. Following their collective speculation, which included her sister identifying various adults they knew as white and all of the siblings as “Colored,” brown-skinned Audre asked them about their light-skinned mother:

“And what’s Mommy? Is she white or Colored?”

“I don’t know,” answered Phyllis impatiently.

“Well,” I said, “If anybody asks me what I am, I’m going to tell them I’m white same as Mommy.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhh, girl, you better not do that,” they both chorused in horror.

“Why not?” I asked, more confused than ever. But neither of them could tell me why.

That was the first and only time my sisters and I discussed race as a reality in my house, or at any rate as it applied to ourselves. (pp. 58-59)

The frame of this brief story with non-narrative elements makes it particularly powerful. In the previous section of the same chapter, Lorde provided a reflection and a vision:

As a child, the most horrible condition I could contemplate was being wrong and being discovered. Mistakes could mean exposure, maybe even annihilation. In my mother’s house, there was no room in which to make errors, no room to be wrong.

I grew Black as my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing—copying from my mother what was in her, unfulfilled. I grew Black as *Sebouli*¹³, who I was to find in the cool mud halls of Abomey¹⁴ several lifetimes later—and, as alone....

I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street unacknowledged and unadmitted. How much of this is the pretense of self-rejection that became an immovable protective mask, how much the programmed hate that we were fed to keep ourselves a part, apart?

This intricate weaving together of narrative with other elements is characteristic of the writing in *Zami*. There are passages where her memories are presented more as images—of clothing and of food, of music, of decor—than as stories. Most of all, the stories and the visions and dreams all circle back to the women she loved, both real and imagined, and to her continuing grappling with her identities and where she might belong.

Lorde included many discussions of identity (Milatovic, 2015) in this “biomythography” (as the front cover of the original 1982 edition styled it). *Zami* was written with the intention to “cross genres, mix codes,

¹³ A Yoruba name for the Goddess, which translates as *The Mother of Us All*.

¹⁴ A city in Benin.

combine language with action, activism with aesthetics[,] and individual identity formation with collective cultural change” (Milatovic, 2015, para. 3). It was, according to Moy (2014), also written as resistance:

Writing becomes one method Lorde employs to challenge the invisible but very real borders she is expected to remain within. Her text, *Zami*, pushes against the bounds of accepted genres as a literary permutation: part fiction, part myth, part biography. (p. 182)

This defiance, Moy (2014) wrote, can also be found in other work by Lorde, including her poetry and her essays; “In fact, Lorde’s use of language, particularly her writing, often serve[d] as a primary mode of her identity formation” (p. 182).

Lorde also used formatting and arrangement to disrupt the linear narrative form that is conventional for autobiographies and memoirs when she wrote *Zami*. For example, she included a section formatted as a question-and-answer sort of self-interview that appears before the prologue. She also included two interludes with their own titles—in addition to as well as within numbered chapters—and one of them, “How I Became a Poet,” was further set apart by the frame of a beginning epigraph that is repeated at the end of it: “Wherever the bird with no feet flew she found trees with no limbs” (pp. 31-34). The story/stories Lorde created is cyclical (Milatovic, 2015) rather than following a narrative arc. Clearly, the stories were deliberately arranged in a non-linear stream rather than chronologically, but she also (sporadically) provided dates for individual poems, dreams, and vignettes that anchor specific thoughts and experiences.

Across her body of work, Lorde used the first strategy I have named as genre fluidity—writing in multiple conventional genre forms—and *Zami* stands as an opus that exemplifies the second strategy of genre fluidity by incorporating much more than myth into her creative biography.

GLORIA ANZALDÚA

As the genre-fluid author of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa also created a text that incorporated multiple genre forms. *Borderlands* included poems, cultural history, reflections on her identity as a queer Chicana woman, writing on mythology and spirituality, personal narratives, historical and critical essays, and academic arguments—as well as “reportorial prose,” “autobiographical stream of

consciousness,” and “incantatory mythic chants” (Lunsford, 2004, p. 35). Within its text, Anzaldúa described

Borderlands as:

This almost finished product [that] seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle. (1987/2012, p. 88).

This book is not her only genre-fluid work. Other writing by Anzaldúa has been recognized as similarly composed via genre fluidity: “Every text she wrote wove descriptive sociology, history, and political critique with recipes, personal narrative, poetry, dream images, and other unexpurgated elements of a lively intellect” (Martín Alcoff, 2005, pp. 257-258). Even when her writing fell within a single genre category, Anzaldúa was working toward a single overarching goal, so those other texts also provide examples of genre fluidity. Her tasks were healing in many ways, and her words were the balm that made healing possible. Her “Mestiza Way” of writing empowered “her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity,” and resulted in her being “able to transform herself” (Anzaldúa, p. 104).

Borderlands was a deliberate assemblage of thematic messages—rendered in overlapping authorial ‘voices,’ combining narrative, poetry, essay, polemic, and more—and took shape as a genre-fluid text. The text is sprawling and diverse: Anzaldúa told a number of personal stories, included a half-dozen short chapters of poems, extended several chapters of scholarship on the cultural and political history of the relatively fluid U.S.-Mexico border, mused at several points on queer and feminist and Chicana identity, and conducted in-depth explorations of mythology and spirituality. At the very least, the genre forms she employed include narratives, poetry, essays (historical and critical), and academic argument.

AN EVERGREEN BEGINNING: A DIGRESSION

Anzaldúa began her best-known text—literally—at the place where so much of her work began, at the Mexico-United States border:

Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash. (1987/2012, p. 23)

These first lines from the poem that opened her signature work situated the entire book that followed, describing the liminal space that makes up the borderlands Anzaldúa was writing about. Yet the poem's next line further situated Anzaldúa, as she wrote about where her gaze fell—"across the border in Mexico" (p. 23)—because the geographic space she inhabited was, at the time at least, on the U.S. side of the national boundary line.

Written more than 30 years before I began this project, it seems a tragedy that the contested liminal space of this same border has not changed for the better. Although I try to remember that Anzaldúa herself predicted it would take centuries to heal (p. 102), it still is a source of great pain. In this poem, Anzaldúa watched as "silver waves marbled with spume" (p. 23) created an opening beneath a fence at the border, and then she walked "through the hole in the fence / to the other side" (p. 24). The poem blended the slight haze of a dream with tangible touches of reality:

*Oigo el llorido del mar, el respiro del aire,*¹⁵
My heart surges to the beat of the sea.
In the gray haze of the sun
The gulls' shrill cry of hunger,
The tangy smell of the sea seeping into me. (p. 24)

Anzaldúa continued her description of the border, calling it "the steel curtain" and the "'Tortilla Curtain'" as well as a "1,950 mile-long open wound...running down the length of [her] body" (p. 24), and then claimed "This is my home / this thin edge of / barbwire" (p. 25). Such a powerful opening to *Borderlands/La Frontera* set the tone for this rich, multi-genre text.

In that opening chapter, The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro*¹⁶ México, Anzaldúa sketched her definition of the U.S.-Mexico border with images and emotion, and then she provided a history of the region. It is "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 25), she wrote. The border, as she saw it, is "set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (p. 25, italics in the original), and is "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (p. 25). Moreover, she saw it as a fearful place: "Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger" (p. 26). Anzaldúa claimed her ancestral connections to the borderland as she described the "stripping of Indians and Mexicans of their land" (p. 29) during the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in visceral terms: "we were jerked out by our roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and history" (p. 30).

Despite the horrors of its history as well as its presence, I am hopeful that her prophecy of healing will come to pass, and earlier than she believed it would.

Weaving together political and economic history of the region with the specific experience of her grandparents and parents, Anzaldúa situated her own story within the saga of the borderlands. In *La Frontera*, she wrote about her identity and how she was shaped by her family's six generations of history in this border

¹⁵ my translation: *I hear the cry of the sea, the breath of air*,

¹⁶ tr: *The Other*

region, by her sexuality and gender, and by the influences of religious traditions from Atztec/pre-Columbian cultures and the colonial Catholic Church.

There are significant passages in this text that are deeply spiritual, especially where Anzaldúa wrote about the power she derived from her embrace of “a folk Catholicism with many elements” (p. 49) and the imagery of “*Coatlique*, the Serpent Goddess” (p. 49). This power, “*La facultad*”¹⁷, was her term for “a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (p. 61), Anzaldúa’s strategy that “deepens the way we see concrete objects and people” (p. 61). *La facultad* was used by Anzaldúa in the sense of an ability, or gift. “Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious” (p. 70), Anzaldúa also asserted in her writing about spiritual power; and she named “a greater power than the conscious I” as her “inner self, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations” (p. 72). This deeply spiritual section in *Borderlands/La Frontera* sits less comfortably in academia than the historical, political, or cultural identity discussions have, but devoting the better part of three chapters in this text to spirituality and power was clearly an intentional choice for Anzaldúa.

In the last prose chapter of *La Frontera*, the focus is deeply theoretical, yet Anzaldúa wrote of a personified struggle by *la Mestiza*¹⁸, as though she were a character, to survive and thrive. While “subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders,” the Mestiza also “has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p. 101). This metaphorical woman—who is, at the same time, somehow also Anzaldúa herself—is in a unique place:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality. She operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa, p. 101)

Borderlands/La Frontera is a genre-busting text that defies categorization, and Anzaldúa employed a number of rhetorical strategies in its composition. Kynclová (2006) argued that the organization of *La Frontera* is

¹⁷ Literally, *faculty*. My translation: *ability, gift*

¹⁸ Note that Anzaldúa did not always capitalize *Mestiza*, even when referencing that personification. APA now calls for capitalizing all names for Indigenous people, but I have left quoted text as Anzaldúa wrote it.

constructed to literally model Mestiza consciousness as “the utter representation of freedom”: Anzaldúa “liberated herself from the academically dictated style of prose- and poetry-writing,” achieving “unrestricted expression which both conveys and embodies the author's message” (Kynclová, 2006, p. 45). Very much about a fluid, ever-evolving identity, *Borderlands* is a book that also represented the borderlands themselves, both as an actual location and the “the condition of a large Latino diaspora, [and] the terms on which a diasporic community negotiates its relations with home and host countries” (Franco, 2002, p. 120).

Martín Alcoff (2006) described Anzaldúa’s writing style as “a deliberately nonobjective strategy [that] has major theoretical and political benefits” and that “can galvanize us into doing the hard work that theory demands, to achieve understanding through a rigorous and unedited reflection on experience” (p. 258).

Borderlands, and Anzaldúa’s writing in general has not been universally lauded, however. Castillo (2006) described Anzaldúa as “inspirational,” but also “a bit short on theory-side calibrations” (p. 264), and names the *Borderlands* author as “always more about activism than academics” (Castillo, p. 264).

In later *Borderlands* chapters, Anzaldúa shifted to a discussion of the power of language and the ways words shape identity, in preparation for the introduction of her ideas about Mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa asserted, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing....I will overcome the tradition of silence” (p. 81). She embraced storytelling as common for her background—“Nudge a Mexican and she or he will break out with a story” (p. 87)—and declared “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become” (p. 93). “I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life,” she also said, “It is all one” (p. 95). Anzaldúa closed out her powerful chapter about writing, which carries the title “*Tlilli, Tlapalli*¹⁹: The Path of the Red and Black Ink,” with another declaration, claiming that writing is sustained only by “a blood sacrifice” (p. 97):

For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images...are my offerings, are my Aztec blood sacrifices. (p. 97)

¹⁹ tr: *Black, Red*

With those stirring words, Anzaldúa moved on to her final prose chapter, “*La conciencia de la mestiza*”²⁰: Toward a New Consciousness,” which is the very heart of what her text grappled with.

The *Borderlands* concept of Mestiza consciousness “is work that the soul performs” and work that takes place “where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (p. 101). Anzaldúa proclaimed that “healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts” (p. 102) would be the eventual outcome of this work, though she predicted it may be “*en unas pocas centurias*”²¹ (p. 102). In this prophecy, Anzaldúa called for a form of “(r)evolution” and assured her readers that “if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (p. 103). Mestiza consciousness is a concept that “does not see any real division between theory and poetry—the discourse of truth versus literary discourse” (Torres, 2004, n.p.), but instead uses autobiographical writing as “an efficient vehicle to construct discursive knowledge over such disciplinary genres as history, ethnography, and psychoanalysis” (Torres, 2005, n.p.). The poems following the prose chapters also employed imagery and the metaphorical character of a Mestiza, echoing many of the ideas and experiences woven into the earlier chapters.

A more literary image that reappeared numerous times in *Borderlands* is the mythical figure of La Llorona, the wailing woman. In perhaps the most powerful example of this archetype’s appearance, a poem titled “My Black *Angelos*” includes the following lines:

*Una mujer vaga en los noche*²²
*anda errante con las almas de los muertos*²³.

Aiiii aiiii aiiiiii
She is crying for the dead child
the lover gone, the lover not yet come:
Her *grito*²⁴ splinters the night. (p. 206)

This deeply powerful passage focuses on grief, but Anzaldúa’s writing also embraces the idea of moving “from victimhood to active resistance, from the wailing of suffering and grief to the *grito* of resistance, and on

²⁰ tr: *The Consciousness of the Mestiza*

²¹ tr.: *in a few centuries*

²² My translation: *A woman, vague, in the night*

²³ My translation: *goes wandering with the souls of the dead*

²⁴ Tr: *cry*

to the *grito* of celebration and joy” (Anzaldúa, qtd. in Rebolledo, 2006, p. 280). Like in so many other passages in the book, strong feelings of pain and joy are intertwined.

Mystical elements are also common at various points in the text, and the most important instance of this is Anzaldúa’s claim that her Mestiza identity allowed the development of “*La facultad*”, a gift of second sight as “a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (p. 61). This special knowledge, she wrote, allowed her to see more deeply (p. 61) and be “more aware...more conscious” (70). This way of framing her identity—one of many references to power and the creative process—was both mystical and theoretical, as she developed her interpretations of feminist theories by incorporating embodied agency into her expressed understanding of identity: Anzaldúa claimed “my soul makes itself through the creative act” (95). Like Budgeon’s (YEAR) later theoretical assertion that the “self/body configuration is one which is lived via its immersion in a multiplicity of sites, knowledges and processes” (p. 18), as “the choices women make in ‘doing’ embodied identity...[turn] from questions about what women’s bodies *mean* to questions about what women’s bodies can *do*” (18, italics my emphasis), Anzaldúa appeared to live and breathe through the use of language.

Though Anzaldúa’s text was written before queer theory emerged, *Borderlands* is in many ways a quintessentially queer work. A text that is queer “has the effect of locating us in a different past and placing us in a different social landscape” (Rudy, 2000, pp. 197-198); so this book enacts queerness in the theoretical sense because it is “committed to challenging that which is perceived as normal” (Rudy, p. 197). This work is queer and feminist, theoretical and personal, and is a work of rhetoric and of literature. Anzaldúa employed rhetorical strategies in the writing and arrangement of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. The text included classical persuasive strategies such as ethos and pathos, among a number of rhetorical devices that lent additional power to Anzaldúa’s work. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a translingual text that invokes powerful imagery and theory, combining the raw power of words in sophisticated ways. It employed multiple—and mixed—writing genres to approach central themes in different forms. In this way, it functioned as a genre-fluid text and incorporates the feminist rhetorical strategy of multivocality.

ALICE WALKER

Though she may be best-known for her novel *The Color Purple*, Walker has also written poetry, essays, a travelogue, memoir, autobiography, short stories, children's books, speeches, documentary, literary fiction, polemics, a screenplay, biographies of other writers, newspaper stories, podcasts, magazine articles, and a blog about chickens (Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2020). Labeling her as a genre-fluid writer focuses on her use of the first strategy I identify as genre fluidity: using multiple distinct genre forms for the same purpose.

COMPLAINTS & OBSERVATIONS: A DIGRESSION

Since my first encounter with one of her novels, Walker has always been on the short list of my favorite writers. In the decades since I first discovered her work, I have sometimes encountered interviews or fiction reviews in the popular press, but the coverage is not as extensive as her work perhaps deserves.

Her work seemingly has not been engaged with by literary scholars—at least not at a level that has resulted in sustained attention to her work beyond those spaces. Clearly I am not an impartial commentator, but I confess this baffles me a bit. If I had gone to graduate school immediately after undergrad—at least if I had done so to earn a literature or women's studies degree—I very well might have written a master's thesis focused on her work. Having moved in other academic directions, I can at least attest that her work has not been taken up in management studies, writing studies, or rhetoric and professional communication. Perhaps there are other disciplines (gender studies? journalism?) where scholars have engaged in an ongoing focus on Walker's body of work, but I have not yet found such a trove. I did find some work from the 1990s that slightly mollified my pointless affront. In a profile that prefaces an anthology of critical writing about Walker, collection co-editor Gates identified both the breadth and range of her work:

Plainly, her achievements as a writer are characterized by an astonishing versatility. She is equally at home with poetry and fiction.... Indeed, as an essayist alone she would be a noteworthy presence in American letters. And, of course, the rigorous sensibility that she designates womanism in her expository prose, one that seeks to transcend the failings she decries in some mainstream feminisms, suffuses her larger oeuvre as well. (Gates, in Gates & Appiah, 1993, pp. x)

In keeping with the frequent assumption that Walker primarily writes fiction, book reviews are one of the more common published examinations of her work. Even when those are focused on a specific text, it is not unusual to see the breadth and—dare I say, genre-fluidity—of her work become a part of the conversation.

In a review of Walker's 1989 *The Temple of My Familiar*, Le Guin (1993) described the novel as complex, "a rainforest tangle, the front and back of the tapestry seen all at once" where the vision is of "life interlocked, multiple, multiplying, endless, desirous, vociferous" (p. 24). Of all Walker's fiction work, this "large-scale work of mythopoesis" (Gates & Appiah, 1993, p. x) is one of the most intricate and wide-ranging of her single-text projects—and where she comes closest to expanding beyond literary genre boundaries—and I see Le Guin's description as fitting for the corpus of Walker's work as well as the specific text under consideration.

Reviews of Walker's books—from unsigned briefs in the popular press to reviews with high profile bylines in more literary venues—have long been negative, yet it has been common even for the sometimes dismissive or eviscerating ones to include an acknowledgement of the wide-ranging scope of her work. One pan of *The*

Cushion in the Road described the text as “a meandering assortment of her ideas and musings...about matters spiritual, political, and personal” (Nonfiction review, 2013, n.p.). Walker’s *Living by the Word* was described as “an uneasy mix of journal entries, short essays, travel notes, speeches and dream fragments”: and as “miscellany” (Nonfiction book, 1989, n.p.). Her short story collection, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, was noted as “stylistically innovative” and “occupy[ing] a sort of middle ground between personal statement, political parable, conventional story and vaguely experimental fiction” even as the work was described as “not a comfortable place for short stories to find themselves” (Pollitt, 1981, para. 5).

This common thread—the rejection of work as insufficient or not literary enough, on the basis of a text being not easily categorized—seems to be an explicit marker of Walker’s frequent use of genre-fluid strategies. Part of what I find so important about her work (and, indeed, part of what I think has made it so powerful, even when not recognized as theoretical or scholarly) is the refusal to be easily categorized. Although she has not published a single mixed-genre opus along the lines of *Zami* and *Borderlands*, Walker has been similarly prolific and similarly unconstrained by a single genre or the general boundaries of creative work.

She has written more fiction than Lorde and Anzaldúa did, and has spent relatively little time as an academic; I suspect that these two factors contribute to her work primarily not being read as ‘theory.’ It is also possible that her explicit critique of certain male scholars; for example, her “memo” addressed to *The Black Scholar* in 1979, responding to an article about “angry black feminists”—which she says the editors rejected as “too ‘personal’ and too ‘hysterical’ to publish” (Walker, 1983, p. 320)—was not apparently seriously considered. That she subsequently published the memo herself, in the collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, was not then considered scholarship. Yet I submit that Walker’s body of creative and journalistic work, like Lorde’s larger corpus has been (Beareno, 1983), should be considered the theoretical grounding of womanism.

As a series of letters written in African American vernacular, *The Color Purple* is already a text that may be viewed as pushing more than one boundary of what fits into the genre form of the novel. Walker has pushed the boundaries of genre formalism on other novels as well, but it is her work in a wide range of genre forms that exemplifies genre fluidity. She employs many—and mostly conventional—genre forms in service to her overall purpose, which she frequently describes as supporting “the rights of all living beings” (Gumbs, Martens, & Williams, 2020), and has also discussed in interviews as promoting greater human understanding:

I’m always trying to give voice to specific people in the hope that if I do that, then that a specific kind of person will be better understood, really brought into the common fund of people that we have knowledge of and therefore we share with, and are in community with. (Wilson, 1993, p. 320)

Walker has also stated her commitments to writing this way: “I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (O’Brien, 1973, p. 192, italics and down-capitalization in the original). In an interview, she once said:

I was brought up to try to see what was wrong and right it. Since I am a writer, writing is how I right it. I was brought up to look at things that are out of joint, out of balance, and to try to bring them into balance. And as a writer that's what I do. (Bradley, 1984, para. 75)

Walker performs a wide range of recognized genres with seeming alacrity. This prolific use of diverse genre forms showcases a strategic employment of genre fluidity in multiple contexts and for multiple specific audiences. As even her critics acknowledge, “Walker’s concern for the state of humanity and the planet comes through” (Nonfiction review, 2013, n.p.). This excerpt of an *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* review exemplifies the single-purpose, multiple-genre approach that is classic Walker:

The consistency of Ms. Walker's focus is what unifies the 33 speeches, letters and previously published pieces collected [here]. Whether the subject is Winnie Mandela, the Million Man March, the Black Panthers or Castro's Cuba, her primary concern is to impart “what I myself have found as an Earthling growing naturally out of the Universe.” (Anderson, 1997, n.p.)

In her poetry, Walker has written on a wide range of topics, some might say, but her central focus remains on human rights for marginalized people—and on environmental issues that impact those human rights. In one example, she drew peaceful connections between people whose leaders are at war—or are constantly on the brink of it—to highlight human rights by protesting the violence nuclear testing can impose on humans and the environment. Her “We Have a Map of the World” (2003) took its title from a 1988 statement by Raymond Yowell, of the Western Shoshone National Council, which reads, in part, “We have a map of the world showing how all nuclear tests have been conducted on the territory of Native peoples” (Walker, p. 436). Walker is from the Southern U.S., and has acknowledged a heritage from Native American, Black, and European American ancestors; yet she also claims common ground with other parts of the world, and dedicated the poem to the Native Kazakstanan-Soviet poet Olzhas Suleimenov (p. 436). “As it is / in my country / so it is / in yours” (p. 436), she wrote, then continued:

I look into
your Asian
your Indian
eyes
and read
your fear:
that your cows
eat
poisoned
grass:
that your wheat

kills (p. 436-37)

Walker's poem goes on to call war and nuclear testing "vigorous rape" (p. 438), and her deliberate use of language designed to offend serves as a form of protest—garnering the maximum possible attention to the issues she raised. In context with the rest of her poem, which also includes the lines "It is all known / now" (p. 437), even the title of this work carries shades of warning, as the implication of "now" is quite haunting. In the context of a body of work that includes blog posts about a chicken named Gertrude Stein and open letters to political and religious leaders around the globe and novels about time-traveling characters from Atlantis, her spare poem about looking into the eyes of another person to establish a human connection still has its place in her wide-ranging portfolio of genre-fluid work.

The theoretical work of Walker's collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), centers on the essay which provided the work its title. Its theme and its meaning, she wrote, came from her finding, "while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative black woman, that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close" (p. 238). In that essay, Walker pushed against Jean Toomer's characterization of Black women as silent, joyless saints—instead claiming Black mothers and grandmothers as Artists²⁵ and Creators, as "rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art" (p. 233). Then she began a litany of questions with these: "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood" (p. 233). She went on to mourn the painters and sculptors who never had the opportunity to create the art, along with the "Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them" (p. 234). The most important theorizing Walker did in this essay was her assertion that quilting, storytelling, and—most of all—planting and tending "ambitious gardens" have become the creative legacies of her mother:

Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.

²⁵ Here I retain Walker's capitalization of terms.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms. (p. 241)

The writing about her mother, who had “praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden” (p. 241), was Walker’s central scholarship. This claiming of an artistic lineage contributes to her work as a writer committed to justice:

Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.

This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time. (pp. 241-242)

Other writing in this volume was scholarship about Zora Neale Hurston and Phyllis Wheatley, several essays about literature, poetry, many family stories, tributes to mentors, open letters to editors, short polemics, and she closes with a tribute to her daughter. In this way, it is representative of her work overall, because she has written in these many genre forms but they are linked enough in theme to work as a collection. This example of genre fluidity highlights how Walker’s work maximizes an expertise across multiple genre formats to continuously express her commitment to “the survival *whole* of [her] people.”

In this chapter, I examined the work of Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Walker, providing a critical discussion of their respective bodies of work as examples of genre fluidity by activist writers. My analysis included a discussion of how each of these writers connect identity and context to their work, and I provided examples of how these writers exemplify genre fluidity. In the previous introductory chapter, I introduced the concept of genre fluidity and provided definitions, terms, and concepts as well as a relevant literature review. Later chapters will describe the contexts of my project, present data, and discuss analysis and observations based on my findings. Next, however, I turn to theories, methodologies, and methods.

CHAPTER 3—EPISTEMOLOGIES, METHODOLOGIES, AND METHODS: THEORIZING A QUEER FEMINIST RESEARCH PROJECT

In the previous chapters, I have discussed genre fluidity and provided definitions, terms, and concepts as well as a relevant literature review; I also discussed the work of the work of Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Walker as examples of writers using genre fluidity to advocate for social and economic justice. In this third chapter, I turn to the epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that are foundational to this project.

In an overtly theoretical dissertation, this third chapter would be the chapter where I would outline a framework, heuristic, or theoretical model to provide new insights or approaches to scholarship. Theoretical models are incredibly valuable contributions to research and scholarly conversations, and many of my colleagues are engaged in the critical work yet to be done. These theories also provide tools for my work, and I am grateful for the foundational and ongoing work of theoretical scholars. But in a full-disclosure act of disidentification, that kind of theorizing—the developing of new ideas—is not the work of this project. Rather, when I use the term *theorizing* here, I am referring to applying existing ideas in new ways or to new situations; to trying things out to see what happens; to explication for greater understanding; to embodying ideas as actions; and to an empirical theory-to-practice endeavor. This theorizing, following Johnson-Odin (1991), is engaged in as a way to “inform both the generation of research questions and the construction of theory” (p. 314).

My purpose in theorizing this way is to take up related threads of existing research and bridge divisions of disciplinary terminology, and to deploy the resulting insights in a way that may weave together strands of research into stronger empirical inquiry to come. Genre fluidity is an exercise of universalizing

common concepts: while acknowledging difference, I operate from an approach that asserts recognized commonalities have great value and can provide both insight and inspiration for praxis. Genre fluidity brings together strands of scholarship from a range of adjacent disciplines, making connections and noting similarities, and my research explores applying these coalesced ideas to writing research and practices in transparent and articulated ways. The use of a single term has the potential to connect scholars doing similar work in different disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences, and to simplify finding our colleagues' work across databases as well.

This third chapter theorizes by connecting identity to the work that writers *do*, rather than to the results writers produce. I begin with a discussion of my epistemologies—and when I use the term *epistemologies* I mean my understanding of rhetorical knowledge- and meaning-making. Outlining these understandings is an explicit move, as I believe assuming shared epistemologies is potentially exclusionary as well as imprecise. I continue the chapter by theorizing identity as a framework for praxis. This extensive theorizing of identity research explicitly focuses on embodiment and intersectionality, framing identity as both internally developed and externally imposed.

Following this, I describe the queer feminist methodologies that emerge from the theorizing and that underpin my project design. When I use the term *methodologies* I mean the systemic theoretical underpinnings of my approach to research and analysis, including the principles that shape my decisions in selecting research questions and designing research projects. By *feminist methodologies* I mean that my approach to research:

- (a) overtly rejects the automatic centering of researchers and institutions,
- (b) views objectivity as both less than achievable and far from ideal, and
- (c) sees practices of meaning-making and change-making as the central uses of theory.

Further, by *queer methodologies*, I mean that my approach to research not only decenters both heteronormative institutions and the false construct of objectivity, but also:

- (d) embraces the potential for disruptions and failures and
- (e) seeks to make meaning out of ambivalence (Glasby, 2019),
- (f) and deliberately focuses on the lived experiences of multiply-marginalized participants.

Finally, I describe the methods that make up my research design for this dissertation project. In this chapter, I use *methods* to name the processes and techniques used in my research project to collect data and encourage participation: for example, my methods were conducting interviews, providing conversation prompts, recording group discussions, and examining proffered writing samples.

MAKING KNOWLEDGE AND MAKING MEANING

Several scholars' work contributes to my understanding of language and writing as situated in as well as shaping human culture. I see writing as inherently social and as a meaning-making activity—a key concept from the field of writing studies (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) that is fundamental to my rhetoric scholarship.

Social relationships and making meaning are both complex ideas that require critical attention to language. Burke (1966) long ago asserted that the symbolic nature of language selects, deflects, and reflects reality. In the case of participants in this project, who live and work and write in eastern North Carolina, the ways they use language to frame their realities and the ways they have been shaped by language are important considerations. Bourdieu (1991/2014) highlighted how language use provides an understanding—and a reinforcement—of our *habitus*, or place in societal hierarchies, and Kramarae (1989) noted language's constrictions on the ways we make meaning. For activists whose work seeks to change the status quo—and for me as a researcher trying to understand more about how language both inhibits and enables change-making—these scholars offer critiques of the power inherent in language that are worth centering in my research.

Ahmed (2006) posited *habitus* as places bodies *inhabit* and where bodies are shaped by routine actions. The *habitus* that participants in this study share is a specific cultural context of time and place—although their identities sometimes result in them experiencing that context in different ways—and their routine actions include writing as part of their activist work. Seeking to understand how this shared place and that shared routine action shape and are shaped by identities, I have invited participants in this study to contribute to the epistemological project that is my dissertation. Like the work of Ahmed, Kramarae,

Bourdieu, and Burke, the insights of this community writing group may be important contributions to an understanding of the sites and spaces where work in justice and equity is needed most, and to understanding the potential writing has to be used for that work.

As a womanist-feminist whose lived experiences have deeply influenced my intellectual curiosities and approach to rhetorical projects, I bring an inherently personal point of view to pair with and inform my scholarship. As a writer and scholar committed to social and economic justice, I find examining and re-examining how identity can potentially shape, compel or hinder rhetorical decisions to be critical. As detailed below, identity is shifting and situational rather than fixed, and it arises from a mix of internal and external factors.

As a rhetorician, my epistemological approach is premised on several general ideas: that identity is socially constructed in some ways and fixed in others; that identity is fundamentally rhetorical because language shapes and names our ideas of who we are; and that inclusion of multiple perspectives deepens and enriches the way we understand and name our place in the world. My identity as a rhetorician is specifically shaped by cultural rhetorics practices, which emphasize that “knowledge is *never* built by individuals but is, instead, accumulated through collective practices within specific communities” (Bratta & Powell, 2016, para. 9). Knowledge and meaning are made within queer and feminist communities and in communities that center complex and multiplicitous identities; my work on this project acknowledges and (hopefully) contributes to that larger accumulation of knowledge.

THEORIZING IDENTITY

The theoretical approaches I employ for this deliberately fluid dissertation project come from multiple academic disciplines—though all of these are ultimately rhetorical. My work is, like that of many cultural rhetorics scholars, at least in part inter-, trans-, cross-, and multi-disciplinary. Rather than engage in the debate about whether queer work is feminist or whether feminist work is queer, for example, I deliberately blend queer and feminist perspectives to apply a blended approach in this project. Further, this fluidity with theoretical approaches makes use of identity theories and concepts, including intersectionality

theory and embodiment. My focus is on writers and their rhetorical decisions as they write, and I approach this project from the stance that business, professional, and technical communication includes much labor that is unrecognized and unpaid; both of these positions situate my work as rhetorical.

This is a queer project. Applying a queer lens is about disrupting norms and rejecting binaries, embracing uncertainty and multiplicity. I claim my own queer identity in everyday contexts, draw on queer rhetorics for my scholarly work, and make use of queer methodologies of instability in my development of the concept of genre fluidity. For writing studies scholars, queer approaches are central to the study of writing and identity (Banks, Cox, & Dadas, 2019; Takayoshi, in Banks, Cox, & Dadas, 2019), which is what my research focuses on here.

This project is also explicitly feminist, answering Frost's (2016) call for feminist scholars to make their feminist work apparent. Feminism, as discussed in Chapter 1, is about "eradicating the ideology of domination" that oppresses and disenfranchises on the basis of gender, race, and class in the service of "imperialism [and] economic expansion" (hooks, 1981). Feminism is political theory as well as a practice (Smith, 1982), and I enact my identity as a feminist in the theorizing and the methodologies as well as in the methods of this project.

From the queer feminist perspective, the articulation of identity may take many forms. It could be a lesbian identity, which Anzaldúa called "the ultimate rebellion" (1987/2012, p. 41), and which itself can take many forms. Additionally, identities of all genders can take many forms, supporting the understanding of identity as both multi-faceted and fluid. Theorists tell us that "the queer troubles the dominant story of how we are to identify" (Alexander, 2008) altogether, so what constitutes gender identity—though still constrained in many ways—is gradually becoming less prescriptive over time. Queer researchers "strive for transparency in the ways [our] identity, the identities of [our] participants, and the identity constructions of the broader culture impact the knowledge [we] make" (Takayoshi, 2019, p. xv). A queer feminist lens also engages "the construction of *all* sexualities in our culture as sites of identity, knowledge, and power," so the way gender functions in "the sociopolitical matrix of our culture" (Alexander, 2008) is more fluid and multi-faceted than once assumed. Likewise, a fully queer feminist lens understands gender identities as wide-ranging and fluid,

and also acknowledges these constructions as places where knowledge originates. This requires an in-depth exploration of identity concepts: how they developed in feminist theory, and the role intersectionality and embodiment play in understanding these ideas.

Over the last few decades, writers and activists have taken up various concepts of rhetorical identity within feminisms. “Let’s all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view” (p. 90), wrote Anzaldúa (1987/2012), who also claimed that her writing *was* her identity: “my soul makes itself through the creative act”; “I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one” (p. 95). Some feminists, including Anzaldúa, embraced what are often understood as essentialist²⁶ ideas in identity rhetorics. Some feminist scholarship on rhetoric and identity has been situated in post-structuralist²⁷ theoretical perspectives instead, generally positing gender as socially constructed (that is, thinking of gender as created and reified by socio-cultural norms rather than innate). These rhetorics of identity complicate how gender and other facets of identity are understood and discussed, from dichotomies of emotion and intellect to separations between the workplace and the home, and so much more.

These two ideas—of essentialism and social construction—have remained in conversation with each other in feminist rhetorics. Drawing on Spivak’s (1988) idea of strategic essentialism—the finding of political common cause based on an element of identity—some social constructionists have used essentialist ideas when a rhetorical strategy perhaps required it, while rejecting truly essentialist understandings of identity. Most social constructions of identity that give names to individuals and groups are rhetorical, especially those related to social location²⁸, and the same can be said for the cultural rhetorics of feminist essentialism. Fuss (1989) proffered one version of feminist strategic essentialism, claiming that feminists would always have to

²⁶ *Essentialism* is, in this context, “the practice of regarding something (such as a presumed human trait) as having innate existence or universal validity rather than as being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct” (Merriam-Webster, n.p.). Essentialism in earlier feminist movements called for an embrace of what were seen as—or, ironically, constructed as—inherent or innate (and often identified as important and positive) understandings of women’s identity. Since then, essentialism for women has unfortunately sometimes been co-opted/constructed as connected to sex (assigned at birth) rather than as connected to gender identity. To the best of my knowledge, I am not drawing on the work of any trans-exclusive bigots who identify themselves as “feminist” in this discussion of essentialism.

²⁷ Here, *poststructuralist* refers to a perspective that is perceived as anti-essentialist, because it understands identity as “inevitably shaped by discursive and interpretive practices” (Merriam-Webster, n.p.).

²⁸ *Social location* is a shorthand phrase for components of identity, both embodied and socially constructed, that collectively position individuals at various proximities and marginal distances from centers of social, cultural, and economic power. (This is my own definition. The term is used in activist and advocacy contexts, among others, but was not in multiple online dictionaries I consulted for reference in June 2020. For more about social location, see Benness (2017) for multiple descriptions and usages.)

be engaged with essentialism in some way or another, but had a choice in how they would do so: they could either “fall into/lapse into” essentialism or “activate/deploy” it (p. 20). Arguing that an essentialist-constructionist divide about identity (at least in terms of gender) was unnecessarily binary, Fuss instead suggested a ‘both/and’ way of understanding and articulating identity. This allowed her to posit a conception of identity as socially constructed while still allowing for the possibility that gender identity might have innate components as well. She argued in favor of using essentialist arguments—whether fully embraced or just adopted strategically as needed—in ways that would advance feminist causes. Having to officially choose a side (as either a constructionist or an essentialist), she implied, is much less important than adopting Spivak’s concept for feminist movements.

In opposition to this strategic approach, Butler (1990) directly challenged an essentialist view of feminine identity. While she perhaps stopped short of wholly endorsing social construction in her signature monograph *Gender Trouble*, she came very close; rejecting essentialism allowed Butler to advance her concept of performing identity—arguing that gender identity, at least, is in part a performance. In her preface to *Gender Trouble*’s 1999 edition, Butler further refined her earlier writing on performing gender, taking up social constructionism without reservation. Asserting that gender norms which appear innate result from essentialist *beliefs* rather than from innate essentialism, she described essentialism as “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates.” While it could be argued that Butler’s work is premised on a complete rejection of essentialism, she further complicated her intellectual position on this understanding of gender identity. Remaining one of the most widely-read post-structural theorists—and with her work being taken up far beyond philosophy, including in feminist and queer rhetorics—Butler further nuanced her *Gender Trouble* position in a 2004 interview:

By the fact that we are socially constructed, we were born into a world we never made. We do not have a lot of choice about who our parents are, who raises us. There are many things that come to us from the outside that we do not choose. And yet there is always the question of how to live these various conditions.

There is one reading of *Gender Trouble*, [sic] which suggests that a person can become one thing one day and then something radically different the next. I don't think that's true. There is another reading of *Gender Trouble* [sic] that concludes that we are fully constituted, we are fully constructed and that means that there is no freedom. I do not think that is true either. I think they are both misunderstandings of what I'm trying to do. (Reddy & Butler, 2004)

Her high profile has made Butler's nuanced interpretation of social construction an important one, with the potential to influence scholars who study rhetorical identities—in and beyond feminist and queer scholarship. This nuancing of identity as constructed by socio-cultural factors, which is not always the aspect of Butler's work that receives the most attention, highlights the complicated and multi-faceted nature of identity.

Similarly, an understanding of identity as multiplicitous (Daniel Tatum, 2000) makes obvious the importance of intersectionality and intersectionality theory, which will be discussed in this next section. Intersectionality theory nuances ideas about identity in ways that significantly complicate both the constructed-vs.-essential debate and the idea of identity as performance. Originating in critical race theory, intersectionality “ultimately disrupt[s] the tendencies to see [gender, sexuality, and race] as exclusive or separable” components of identity, and “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 358, 378). Recognizing a whole within a splintered understanding of many different facets comprising the identity of an individual, intersectionality offers a perspective that is both more complex and more holistic than any single component of identity could ever be. As a concept and a theoretical framework, intersectionality has its roots in Black feminism and is closely connected to decolonial²⁹ feminism. Without these perspectives, feminist theories and feminist scholarship are incomplete, so these ideas are explored in the paragraphs that follow.

Many of the ideas that intersectionality incorporates came from Black feminism, including the scholarship of hooks (1981), Davis (1981), Smith (1983), Walker (1983), Lorde (1984) and others. Intersectionality—both the term and the development of the theory—came from Crenshaw, the legal studies and critical race studies scholar who originally employed it in the context of employment law. At its most basic, intersectionality asserts that various components of identity can multiply (rather than simply add to) experiences of oppression and marginalization, and Crenshaw (1991) described that first usage of the term in her work this way:

²⁹ *Decolonial* as a modifier refers to Indigenous-led scholarship and activism that overtly de-centers Western/colonial/Eurocentric knowledge- and meaning-making, and to the specific rejection of false premises of Western superiority/norms. *Decolonial feminism* specifically refers to feminism that centers Indigenous concepts of gender rather than mostly-binaried and heteronormative Western ideas about gender.

I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences. My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (p. 1244)

She continued that work, examining intersectionality in social and legal contexts, particularly in research related to violence against women, and Crenshaw's term and associated concepts have been taken up and extended by other Black feminist scholars and by scholars in a number of other fields. Sociology scholar Hill Collins was one early adopter of intersectionality theory in her research and writing, and its application in the fields of social work, education, and the social sciences in general spread in the late 1900s and early 2000s. More recently, intersectionality has become a popular term³⁰ in public discourse, which has in turn prompted some academics to begin (or resume) incorporating both the term and its attendant concepts, especially in feminist rhetorics and cultural rhetorics. Hill Collins (2015) has written about the positive and negative aspects of intersectionality theory's migration across various disciplinary landscapes, defining intersectionality theory as one which "references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (p. 2). This more expansive definition is updated to reflect the widened embrace of intersectionality theory, but Hill Collins has argued for intersectionality as both praxis and theory:

Intersectionality can be conceptualized as an overarching knowledge project whose changing contours grow from and respond to social formations of complex social inequalities; within this overarching umbrella, intersectionality can also be profitably conceptualized as a constellation of knowledge projects that change in relation to one another in tandem with changes in the interpretive communities that advance them. The broader knowledge project provides a set of ideas that provide moments of definitional consensus. (2015, p. 5)

³⁰ Note that in too many instances, *intersectional* is used as an informal/shorthand modifier for terms such as *feminism(s)* and *identity/identities*, when specific strands of feminism (the ones that apply an intersectional analysis to naming and resisting oppressions) or a multiplicitous identity (which I term *multiplicity of identity*) are more accurate descriptive modifiers.

Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) have also offered an updated definition of the term Crenshaw's work produced, naming intersectionality as an "insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness" (p. 178). These scholars also identified intersectionality as simultaneously theoretical and practical.

Intersectionality theory builds on the work of hooks (1981), whose writing has long centered on the ways that sexism is inextricably interlocked with racism and classism. While hooks called for Black women to identify as feminists and to organize for feminist causes (p. 195), she also called out white women for a resistance to recognizing the role white supremacy has in propping up patriarchal systems (p. 190-192). hooks drew on the work of Black feminist scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to outline in detail the history which shaped the relationship that Black women have with feminism and feminist movements. hooks' focus on the association of femininity with whiteness as well as with weakness and passivity is an intersectional critique. Sojourner Truth's famous question, "ain't I a woman?" (Truth, qtd. in hooks, 1981, p. 160), which hooks borrowed for the title of her groundbreaking book, is often interpreted as an assertion of women's ability to engage in manual labor. Indeed, hooks pointed out how Truth's presentation was specifically positioned as a debate response to an anti-equality speaker (p. 160), and how the speech Truth made does indeed assert that women have the capacity to be "the work-equals of men" (p. 160). hooks also asked her readers to look further into Truth's argument, which positions her as both a strong worker *and* a loving parent, and further speaks back to the twin implications that 'women' are weak as well as feminine, but that Black women, supposedly, are neither.

In building her intersectional argument around Truth's powerful question, hooks made the argument that the de-linking of Blackness and womanhood has both a long history and a distressing tenacity that has dogged Black women's relationship with and participation in feminist movements. hooks wrote that "one of the United States' most popular sexist-racist myths about black womanhood" is "that black women are inherently more assertive, independent, and domineering than white women" (p. 181). Essentializing Black women as insufficiently feminine, hooks has repeatedly argued, deflects the attention away from systemic,

institutionalized racism and sexism that stubbornly persists in the United States³¹. Like Crenshaw, who critiqued the ways these multiple axes of oppression impact Black women's access to shelter and services for domestic violence survivors, hooks was writing about differences that play out in systemic and oppressive ways.

The strong/weak dichotomies that complicate race and gender intersections are a lose-lose proposition. For example, Talpade Mohanty (1991) critiques what she noted as the tendency of Western³² feminists to view all third-world women as monolithically subaltern and helplessly in need of rescue from patriarchal oppression within their own cultures. Conversely, hooks (1981) demonstrated that Black women are perceived as strong matriarchs who supposedly have more power than Black men—to the point of assumptions that no rescue is needed. Both scholars critiqued the way essentializing approaches to gender identity, especially those that do not apply an intersectional lens, fundamentally ignore the experiences of most women. When hooks situated feminism as a full-on opposition to an “ideology of domination” (p. 194) and to “imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (p. 195), her Black feminist approach largely aligns with Mohanty.

Talpade Mohanty (1991) called “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality” (p. 53) contributors to what she termed Western feminism's “discursive homogenization and systemization of the oppression of women in the third world”³³ (p. 54), and focused on the forced attempt to read every possible gender analysis as aligned with a first/third world economic model. She insisted on the need “for careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities” (p. 69), and noted significant presuppositions (p. 55-56) as she critiqued the way Western feminist analysis relies on “a sociological notion

³¹ And, in everything from medical racism to high rates of school expulsions, and significant levels of carceral and domestic violence, the myth of the strong Black woman that Truth and hooks both dealt with is still with us. (*Misogynoir* is definitely beyond the scope of this dissertation, far beyond, but I suggest Moya Bailey's extensive work on misogynoir as a starting point for scholarship and for activism. Or go on Black Twitter.)

³² Talpade Mohanty (1991) defined *Western feminism* as feminism that “reinforces Western cultural imperialism” in contexts that “perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West” (p. 73) and sees “third world women” as in need of saving. Further, she said Western feminism assumes “Western women [are] secular, liberated, and hav[e] control over their own lives,” which she labeled “a *discursive* self-presentation” rather than “material reality” (p. 74).

³³ Talpade Mohanty (1991) addressed the problematic use of *third world*—to describe women and to describe non-Western feminism—by writing that it suggested “oversimplified similarities” and “implicitly reforc[es] existing economic, cultural, and ideological hierarchies” (p. 74) and identifying her “continuous questioning of the designation” (p. 75). Some might describe scholars such as she with terms like *third world feminist*, or *post-* or *anti-colonial feminist*, but she—as far as I know—has not. Her description of “feminist discourses by and about third world women” as “progressive feminist, antiracist, and] antiimperialist” (p. 75) suggest that one or more of the latter terms would be more appropriate.

of the ‘sameness’ of [women’s] oppression” (p. 56). She spelled out the problem clearly: “the discursively consensual homogeneity of ‘women’ as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of women” (p. 56). As part of her sameness discussion, Talpade Mohanty reminded her readers not to conflate Western feminism and race or nationality. Instead, she identified the need for local context, including class and race and ethnicity in the U.S., as important for understanding differences in feminisms.

Miguda (2010), whose scholarship centers on the Global South, used womanism as a descriptor for her understandings of feminist identity. She argued that individual articulations of identity allow the concept to be shifting and multi-directional as well as multi-dimensional. She further claimed that continued debates about what exactly constitutes identity (and the inherent meanings of other associated terms) are ultimately a divisive waste of energy that could—instead—be used in collective ways to create change. This claiming of identity as unique, but ultimately not worth arguing over³⁴, has allowed her to focus attention on moving beyond binary, fixed, and universal feminisms. Black and decolonial perspectives are valuable for nuanced, kaleidoscopic, and fluid understandings of identity—in and out of feminist scholarship—and frame the discussion of identity in feminist scholarship that continue in the following paragraphs.

Budgeon (2003), for example, sought to move the conversation in feminism from thinking of identity as object to identity as action, which echoes in some ways Butler’s concept of gender performance as well as Miller’s understanding genre as a social act rather than a category of texts. This shift from object to action parallels my thinking about genre fluidity as being strategic action because I see writing as what writers *do* rather than as the texts we produce. Contending that more narrow or bifurcated ideas about identity were insufficient, Budgeon (2003) argued for rethinking any simplistic positions:

The self/body configuration is one which is lived via its immersion in a multiplicity of sites, knowledges and processes, therefore, understanding the choices women make in ‘doing’ embodied identity requires a move beyond reductionist accounts, away from questions about what women’s bodies mean to questions about what women’s bodies can do. (p. 18)

That doing includes the way we present ourselves, so even though some aspects of embodied identity are fixed, some are not. Put another way, some identities are always worn because they are embodied and fixed

³⁴ Given the number of footnotes used (up to this point in this document) to negotiate definitions of and modifiers for *feminism* and *feminist*, I can only agree with Miguda here.

(such as skin color, for example) while other identities exist but may or may not be displayed at any given time. This focus on the idea of lived experience connects with rhetorics of embodiment, which are already well-engaged with feminist rhetorics. Knoblauch (2012) claimed that “embodied rhetoric is a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making within a text”, calling for the “use of terms, metaphors, and analogies that reference...the body itself” (p. 52). Rhetorical expressions of identity can include the “effort by an author to represent aspects of embodiment within the text he or she is shaping” (p. 58). Embodied rhetorical theory posits that bodies are a form of text (Knoblauch, 2012), and, as such, form identities that are “unstable and subject to shifting positionalities [and] transformation” (p. 60). These various presentations and readings—some mutable and some fixed—can vary as individuals move through social, cultural, religious, political, and public spaces, even though some embodied identities cannot be reshaped at will.

Addressing the ways embodiment can enhance or reframe strategic essentialism, Banks (2003) asserted that socially constructed ideas about identity impact rhetorical strategies used in different contexts. Comparing the way some scholars attempt to ignore connections between writers and their texts, which he calls “impossible (and irresponsible),” to earlier Cartesian concepts, Banks situated his argument in feminist rhetorics: “Our belief that we could make such a separation has allowed masculinist rhetorics to become ‘universal’ in modernist discourses because the bodies producing the discourse have been effectively erased” (p. 33). Since embodiment is a lived experience of identities, embodied rhetorics will always reflect this, though he marked these as potentially fluid:

Bodies exist locally and contingently, and the writing that comes from them, through them, reflects that sort of contingency. I have little interest in postmodern nihilism....[but] do not doubt the ways in which we are socially constructed, either. In fact, the “personal” writing I’m calling for requires us to recognize these influences on us more fully. (p. 34)

Understanding that embodied rhetoric is always personal in some way, Banks positioned identity in embodied rhetoric as (at least) theoretically essential as well as socially constructed.

Other scholars have negotiated this dichotomy differently, including class in their analysis. Ebert (2005), for example, took up identity in the contexts of activism and identity politics, arguing that the common ways the term identity is used—applied to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and concepts such as

upper middle-class—value a complexity that is less than useful, particularly in economic systems. She claimed that this fracturing “has fetishized difference” (p. 33) in a way that ignores more basic class identities, therefore keeping many economic power dynamics intact. She pointed out that the ever-multiplying facets of identity divide and subdivide people in so many ways that building coalitions can become nearly impossible. Social and economic change, Ebert (2005) declared, are most likely to be possible when oppressions are understood as parallels in a single system.

In contrast, Martín Alcoff (2005) made the case that identity is social, embodied, *and* experiential, and—as a concept that encompasses all three—she asserted that this complexity goes beyond identity politics in a completely different way. Identity, she argued, is the phenomenology, or experience, of embodiment:

Identities can be used as the alibis for oppressive treatment, to justify a group’s unequal treatment, or as a mechanism for segregation, confinement, and exploitation. They can be inaccurately represented and mistakenly characterized. And they can in some cases be created as a strategy for oppression. (Martín Alcoff, 2005, p. 287)

She further extended this argument, pointing out that identities are in some ways made up of a just-as-it-appears material reality, which is something more than the usual idea of what social construction (as a mutually agreed reality) means:

But even in this latter case, to say that they have been created is to say that they truly exist; thus they are not simply mistakes in reference, or mistaken ways to characterize human experience. The question is not how to overcome identity, but how to transform our current interpretations and understandings of [it]. (p. 287)

Martín Alcoff also argued that theory-based analyses of oppression are not equally transferable or applicable to different identities (2005). The implication of her assertions is that some identities are fully constructed by society, but that others are essential—or almost universally perceived to be—because of their tangible, visible materiality.

Though the definitions of identity within feminism have changed over time, due in part to the proliferation of different understandings and rhetorical applications of strategic essentialism (that is, the finding of political common cause based on a shared element of identity), these varied and shifting concepts of identity have also overlapped with a range of other theoretical perspectives—especially where embodiment and materiality bridge that divide. Put another way, some theorists have suggested that identities are

materially, rather than socially, constructed. The concept of cyborg identity, for example, draws on materiality and embodiment rhetorics in ways that extend the idea of identity beyond the social. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (2016/1991) was a foundational text in feminist post-humanism, and she claimed a cyborg identity for herself and the rest of humanity: "We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (p. 7). Rejecting both essentialism and social construction, Haraway called for a new understanding of identity that is constructed technologically—thereby re-visioning what it means to be a human of any gender. She, like many feminist theorists before her (and, indeed, since), took issue with dichotomous Cartesian concepts of identity, and her use of identity is a springboard for a new, post-humanist understanding. In recent years, embodied rhetorics have connected with material understandings of identity—but have done so while embedded in the post- and trans-humanist ways that bodies inhabit and interact with space.

Other scholars have shifted away from post-structural feminist understandings of identity by returning to the basics of rhetorics, suggesting that new terminology is required to fully articulate these post-structural shifts. Walsh (2015), for instance, has called for the renaming of identities, describing them as "regressive designation[s] of lived experience of marginalization" (p. 62) that are valuable—even vital. Challenging the dismissal of identity as simply a bias or point of view, she instead lays claim to identity as a source of truth in rhetorics, and, ultimately, names identity as a tool that can both critique academic research practices and allow a focus on more thorough inquiry. This, in her framing, begins re-shaping what identity means and articulates the potential value of this new understanding of identity.

Employing intersectionality and embodiment theories, phenomenology, queer theory, and decolonialism in the understanding of identity, some feminist rhetoricians take up the concept of identity—including its lineage of strategic essentialism and cyborg transhumanism—by asserting that it is multi-faceted and unique as well as contextual, contingent and fluid. While this dissertation draws on a range of feminist understandings of identity, in all of their disputation and complexity, I lean most on Walsh's (2015) framing of identities as lived experiences that can be sources of rhetorical truth. Identity, as an individual, complex, and multiplicitous internal understanding of who each of us is—and, in part, who we are understood to be in

social contexts³⁵. I also generally conceptualize identity as plural, acknowledging the multiplicities inherent in this multi-faceted understanding of the concept. I connect genre fluidity to identity, noting genre-fluid moves as strategic responses to individual experiences in specific communication contexts.

METHODOLOGIES QUEER & FEMINIST

My conception of a queer feminist approach to research originated with welcoming a bit of uncertainty into the process. I began this project more interested in writers than in written texts, and by dis-identifying with typical understandings of what it means to do theory. By focusing on open-ended research questions rather than specific hypotheses to prove or disprove, my project began in a place of somewhat “not yet here”-ness (Muñoz, 2009). In the beginning of the project, that bit of instability made the project more difficult to articulate, but that queer methodology has ultimately opened up the multiplicitous possibilities for learning about the participants and the ways they write their identities. I grounded this project by centering the writers I wanted to learn more about—Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Walker—and this influenced the design of the project as well as the resulting dissertation. Further, feminist methodologies shaped a project that includes me as a part of the writing group rather than separate from it, and feminist praxis was the genesis for the theorizing I do in this chapter.

A DIGRESSION ON RESEARCH TRAINING

The first academic project I worked on, as a research assistant to Bradley Dilger and Neil Baird, embraced some of the methodologies and methods I describe in this chapter and use in this project. As a brand-new academic whose previous research experience was in the field of journalism, I did not yet know all about the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the methods they employed. Instead, I just learned about the kind of qualitative research they were engaged in—with little understanding of how quantitative researchers might view this approach.

For example, each participant in Bradley and Neil’s three-year longitudinal study was interviewed multiple times, and at various points the interviews focused on writing identities, on their writing experiences in various contexts, and on specific texts the participants had written. At the end of each year, one interview session was dedicated to a “member check”—where the written observations and conclusions were presented to the individual participant. This procedure allowed time for the participant to read what had been written

³⁵ As I noted in Chapter 1, in my own definition of *identity*, individual understandings of this concept may include or be influenced by connections with and by power differentials among (in no particular order) communities, relationships, lands, and histories; demographic categories created by governmental agencies and/or social science; identifications/disidentifications with one or more economic classes, social groups, values, or faith traditions; and material realities and embodied experiences.

about them and to see how the researchers were describing what they had been observing over the past year(s). Then each participant also had the opportunity to respond to and reflect on what had been written. They also had the opportunity to ask questions of the researchers at every interview.

Having already seen these feminist methodologies and methods enacted has been a real advantage for me as a researcher. I see the value of these participant-centering approaches—and I also am aware of just how much can be learned about writing by using methodologies that center the participants instead of centering myself as a putative expert who treats community writers and their work as ‘objects’ of study.

My methodologies are shaped by queer feminist approaches and by my personal values. As a result, this project employs participatory and phenomenological practices and engages with Creswell’s (2009) assertion that narrative and phenomenological approaches in qualitative research are both methods—what we do when we research—and methodologies—why we do research the way we do. This view of narrative and phenomenological work as both methods and methodologies is not intended to blur theories *of* research with techniques or practices *in* research; as feminist researchers including Harding (1987) have rightly noted, methods and methodologies are quite different, and this distinction is a priority for “any researcher committed to understanding how research practice works to create knowledge” (Takayoshi, 2019, p. xi). Rather, I claim both narrative and phenomenological framings and practices.

As previously stated, my methodologies begin with decentering myself and the construction of my work as ‘objective’ (a queer and feminist framing), valuing of meaning-making and change-making as the purpose of academic work (a feminist approach), and embracing possible disruptions and failures as I focus on the lived experiences of multiply-marginalized participants (a queer approach). Kirsch and Royster (2010) called for highlighting the subjectivity of researchers through the feminist rhetorical practice of strategic contemplation, a “back-and-forth movement [that] calls for work that is not merely analytical but also embodied, grounded in the communities from which it emanates” (p. 659).

My research, following Grabill (2007) and many others, positions the researcher as conducting inquiry *along with* individuals and groups, not researching *on* individuals. Participatory research involves “working with people to answer questions and solve problems” (p. 45), and has “pragmatic goals” (Grabill, 2007, p. 46). Following Haas’ (2012) assertion that participating in discourse is a primary function of rhetoric, and Miller’s (1984) claim that genre knowledge is critical to “understanding how to participate” in a

community (p. 165), I designed this project to encourage participants to engage with each other—and the methods I describe later in this chapter reflect that approach. I was committed to positioning conversations about their writing, including the genre formats they write in and how this work connects with their identities, as an important part of the project.

POWER AND RESEARCH ‘SUBJECTS’: A DIGRESSION

Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (2014) raised the issue of empowerment in the context of language research, addressing different approaches to projects often labeled as ‘human subject’ research. They argued that language research—and indeed much of the research conducted in the social sciences—should be conducted with a keen awareness of oppression, power, and class issues. Citing a purely ethics-based positioning as “wholly proper” (p. 136) yet still requiring the depersonalizing of ‘subjects’ being researched, and faulting advocacy-focused positioning as ultimately positivist, they instead suggested an empowerment-based approach to research as a model for academics to consider. They outlined three ideas about ways to practice empowerment-based research: creating open and interactive designs, addressing the agendas of ‘subjects,’ and sharing knowledge across boundaries. Their understanding of power as something that is not unidirectional or static makes their approach to an empowerment model appealing, because it aligns with my personal values, and I also drew upon this understanding as I designed and carried out my project.

My use of a phenomenological methodology was deliberate; applying this methodology meant the project sought to explore how participants in the project experienced the act of writing and how they experienced their writing identities. Likewise, my commitment to a narrative methodology has centered the stories and experiences of participants in this project; that focus has been shaped by the claims of Powell (in Powell and colleagues, 2014) and King (2005) that narrative is critical to understanding each other and our ideas. And my commitment to narrative methodology has been furthered by the inspiration provided by one of the study participants, M’J, who continually stressed that shared story is central to establishing human connection.

My own stance as a queer feminist researcher is shaped by many of the same ideas and ideals, too: treating (and describing) individuals as *participants* or *respondents* rather than subjects is a critical first step; taking the needs and interests of these participants into account is important throughout a project; and learning *from* individuals in a study as well as learning *about* them—sharing of observations and conclusions based on the research project underway—is also crucial to this empowerment model. Much of my work up to

this point has been qualitative, and my interests in social and economic justice continue to point me toward values-based research methods such as those I describe below.

RESEARCH METHODS

My study was an emergent qualitative research project, where I recruited community activists for participation in a writing group, and I interviewed participants before and after the series of meetings with group members. This last section of the chapter describes my methods for the dissertation project, including recruitment strategies, organization and scheduling of writing group meetings, data collection, and data analysis. Following my epistemological and methodological approaches, this methods section also highlights the corresponding social justice commitments that have contributed to shaping my research methods.

The emergent design meant I began with a process that was nominally prescribed; that is, I outlined a basic overview of the project rather than detailing every step in advance. This was a deliberate choice, as I expected the plan might change or shift in a number of ways after the study began (for example, such as expanding or reframing the questions being asked, collecting different kinds of data, or otherwise following where study participants led). In this qualitative study, I collected and analyzed data (observations, interviews, conversations, and documents) myself rather than using instruments or protocols developed by other researchers.

I used case study, phenomenological, and narrative methods in this research. Case studies were an appropriate choice, since this method makes the most of a small number of participants, examining a topic deeply in a way that frames a “time and activity” for “a variety of [detailed] data collection activities” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The phenomenological methods focused on the lived experiences of participants, as a way their experiences to respond to rather than necessarily answer my research questions (Baird & Dilger, 2017). The narrative methods focused on the stories research participants told, building on process tracing (Roozen, 2009) and discourse-based techniques (Odell, Goswami, & Herrington, 1983). Both methods, phenomenological and narrative, were used with the goal of developing collaborative narratives—or stories co-constructed with participants via informal check-ins (Alsup, 2010)—which is in keeping with the feminist

methodologies underpinning this project. As Kirsch (2012) noted, writing studies research has broadened to include, respect, and seek participants and rhetorical activities from marginalized communities, and this project intentionally furthers that work.

For my project, I set out to facilitate a community group where participants engage in a series of conversations and reflections about their writing projects—and potential writing projects—related to advocacy for social and economic justice. As Roozen (2015) has articulated, “writers come to develop and perform identities in relation to the interests, beliefs, and values of the communities they engage with” (p. 50), so I sought to work with individuals who were already engaged in their communities. My interests and my research questions focus on the activist work community members already do, so the goal here was not to create artificial assignments or additional work. Instead, my goal was to work with community writers already engaged in writing of some kind. As previously stated, this project has been designed to explore possible answers to these questions: What genre-fluid strategies do writers enact in their writing contexts? (RQ1). How and why do writers employ these strategies when they write? (RQ2). What role does identity play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers? (RQ3). What role does context play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers? (RQ4). Genre-fluid writers often employ more than one conventional genre form to serve their purpose, and they do this by molding multiple genre forms into a single text or by creating several texts related in purpose but representing various genre forms.

Preparation. Preparation for the work of this project included several requirements that are common for doctoral research (coursework, candidacy exams, then proposing and defending a prospectus) and for conducting research that involved people (specific training³⁶, then getting approval by an oversight board³⁷). With limited resources, both in terms of my pre-grad-school class position in general and my full-time student status, I also had limited financial resources for funding the project. Because I also had specific

³⁶ In addition to the training and mentorship from working as a research assistant for Bradley Dilger and Neil Baird while a graduate student, which I believe gave me a foundation for feminist research practices in writing studies, I completed specific training certifications for ‘human subject’ researchers. These included the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Group 2 training for Social/Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel (required at my institution), and additional training offered by the National Institutes of Health’s Office of Extramural Research, the Protecting Human Research Participants training. I also completed the CITI Humanities Responsible Conduct of Research training and attended workshops (offered through the Office of Faculty Excellence at East Carolina University) on conducting qualitative interviews and on coding collected data.

³⁷ After publicly defending my prospectus and gaining the approval of my committee, I submitted my research proposal to the East Carolina University Institutional Review Board, which approved my project (approval letter is Appendix A).

commitments to accessibility—including physical as well as fiscal access—that are grounded in my feminist methodologies and queer approaches to research, finding an appropriate location for the writing group meetings was a priority. As the next few paragraphs make clear, finding the right location was a significant part of my preparation for the project—and are important enough, I believe, to merit the detailed discussion.

My goal was to find a meeting location that offered as much accessibility as possible; again, this commitment is fundamental to any feminist research agenda, and I applied these principles in evaluating potential meeting sites. Additionally, perceived accessibility was also an important factor I took into consideration. While my institution's campus has a number of locations that are physically accessible and would have been within reach of a doctoral project's budget, my understanding of the ways institutions are sometimes perceived in communities prompted me to consider off-campus options. I was aware of how a project might be viewed as more clinical and less engaged with the community if it were held at the university. I was also cognizant of how individuals who believe they are bad writers (see more on this belief, below) or believe they are otherwise not academic material—especially if the group meetings were held in a classroom—might be less likely to participate, so I decided to stay off of campus as much as possible very early in the process. I was also well aware of the high cost and logistical hurdles required for parking on campus, even for students; so I understood from the beginning that, even without barriers related to lack of an automobile or to funds for gasoline, an on-campus meeting place could exclude community members I hoped to work with.

Access and inclusion are multi-faceted, so it was important to me to seek a space that removed as many other obstacles as possible. I secured a meeting space for the community writing group at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greenville, NC.³⁸ Both the faith tradition and the local congregation—which has earned the denomination's certification as an LGBTQ+ Welcoming Congregation—have a reputation for inclusivity and for involvement in social justice work, and the property itself has several features that made it close to ideal for a community writing group meeting space. The building has designated handicapped parking

³⁸ Full disclosure: while the congregation often provides a meeting space of a range of community events and organizations that align with its core values, my membership in the congregation made it simple to get permission to use space in the building to meet with participants for individual interviews as well as to meet with the writing group. As a member, I was able to use the space at no charge, which made it a grad-student-budget-friendly option, too.

spaces near the front entrance and has ramp access to its front doors. The front doors and interior hallway doors are wide enough for wheelchair users and double-cane users. Almost all the seating in the building is arm-free, though some seats with armrests are available, and none of the seating in the building is fixed. The building also has non-gendered single-stall restrooms. As an organization that recognizes the connections between environmental justice and social and economic justice, the congregation has also installed solar panels and generates more power than it uses. My inclusivity goals also considered the possible needs of parents, and I received permission to use space on-site for any participants needing childcare. Additionally, the congregation agreed to share access to their roster of screened and trained childcare providers, if needed.

A BRIEF POLEMIC

Making inclusivity commitments to social and economic justice—including removing and circumventing barriers and perceived barriers to participation by individuals with a range of identities—should be a standard part of project logistics for any feminist research.

Recalling hooks' (1981) definition of feminism, as prioritizing the self-development of all people, I take this broader definition as the standard—even as I acknowledge that other researchers (especially those with very limited funds) may not be able to find a free meeting space in a building that is already designed or adapted for broad understandings of inclusivity.

It is important to acknowledge that the congregation which so generously allowed me to use this building is part of a denomination that is predominantly white and has a history that is reflective of this fact. The Unitarian Universalist Association (2020) is currently engaged in both anti-racist coalition work and an examination of its historical shortcomings in terms of race, which—despite the racial diversity of the local congregation and of its leadership—meant that whiteness still could have been inferred in relation to a community writing group meeting in the space. As a result, efforts to recruit a range of participants, including from communities of color, were designed in part to balance out the possibility of this inference.

Recruiting Participants. For this project, I sought participants who were already working on writing projects and were—in some cases—already exploring various writing genres while focusing on their primary social justice goals. I wanted to recruit participants based on their use of (or intention to use) writing

for social justice advocacy, but already (or even eventually) identifying as a writer or engaging in genre-fluid writing was not a criterion for participation.

I worked to recruit possible participants widely across the community because I knew that this was not my home place—and so I did not have decades of connections built and sustained from activist work and community partnerships. Instead, I was an outsider to the larger community, having arrived in town a couple of years prior for the purposes of attending PhD school and having spent the majority of my time on the university campus. As a result, the sampling that drew in participants was within one or two degrees of acquaintance³⁹.

As stated, I wanted to recruit participants with a wide range of identities—including diversity in class, race, gender, sexuality, physical and neural ability, age, size, religion, educational background, and more—and to draw primarily from the community in and around Greenville, North Carolina. Indeed, although the writing group that participated in the project was quite small ($n=4$), they collectively represented multiple identities of class, race, sexuality, gender, health status, age, size, family status, and religion. The group was



Figure 1 - Identities represented in the writing group: All participants

³⁹ Patterson (2019) named this form of nonprobability sampling in recruitment methods *queer/trans kinship sampling* (pp. 62-66). It very much aligns with long-time queer practices of building what I call *queer fam* (queer and queer-adjacent folk who have built familial ties in our communities) for our 'chosen' or 'made' families.

less diverse in other ways, including being relatively able-bodied, educated, and cisgender.

The identities articulated by the participants in the research study included some identities of the demographic, constructed, and embodied kind, but they also provided other identities, from relationship roles to occupational, political, and disciplinary identities. The word cloud graphic on the previous page (Figure 1) illustrates all of the identity terms, from the beginning of the study to its conclusion, that participants used to describe themselves.

A SIDE STORY

In every community where I have lived and worked, the most common responses when people find out I teach writing—or, in the past, that I worked in an English department or was a journalist—has been for them to tell me they are not writers, or that they are terrible writers, or to recount a story of when they did poorly on a writing assignment in school. It may have been college, high school, middle school, or even elementary school, but I’ve heard story after story of people struggling and coming to the conclusion—sometimes with significant help from a teacher—that they “cannot write.” I’m often told English is someone’s “worst subject,” and in general people seem to think they are not writers at all, or that they are lousy writers.

The result was similar when, before becoming an academic, new acquaintances or strangers engaging in polite chit-chat found out I was a writer: they wished they weren’t “terrible” writers, said they could “never” be a writer, said they hate writing. They told me they dropped out of college (or almost did) because they could not pass first-year writing; and they said things such as if they “had to write for a living” they’d not have any income at all.

In these situations, of course, I also heard lots of disclaimers related to commas, to spelling, to grammar, to adding filler or “fluff and stuff,” and other sorts of mechanical concerns. (That divide between what writing is and what it is commonly perceived to be—which is not the subject of this dissertation, but was in part a focus of my master’s thesis—will doubtless continue to inspire other projects in writing studies scholarship for quite some time. As it should.) Because of this concern, I deliberately created a recruitment piece that overtly centered the project’s focus on advocacy instead of its examination of writing—just as I chose to find an off-campus meeting site. These choices, I hoped, would prevent potential participants from preemptively deselecting themselves.

My recruitment flyer (Appendix B) for the project included two questions as a header. I wanted to get the attention of community volunteers and others working on projects related to social and economic justice, so used invitational language to prompt responses. The two questions I used were as follows: Are you an advocate for social and economic justice? Are you a community volunteer, organizer, or activist in (or near) Greenville, North Carolina? I deliberately chose not to use some version of an “are you a writer?” question, as I sought to find participants who may or may not specifically identify as a writer. I wanted to

include people who might not be comfortable identifying themselves as writers or feel that writing was their specific expertise. Since common understandings of writing, especially writing well, are often associated with education, I thought this would help balance the clear association with the university.

Much of the balance of the flyer came from the consent form (see Appendix C) developed for the study. Again, I chose language from the boilerplate sections on why community members, rather than professional writers or politicians, were being sought for the study. For example, the flyer included the purpose of the study, which was described this way: “to learn more about the choices and decisions that community members make when they support and write about social and economic justice causes.” This recruiting decision was also designed to highlight the point that the project focuses on regular people rather than “writers.” In keeping with my social justice commitments and my desire for broad and diverse participation in every way possible, the accessibility statement on the flyer read this way: “Accessibility for disability, economic class, and/or marginalized identity is fundamental to this project.”

I created the flyer in several digital formats (as a .png, a .jpg, and a .pdf) for printing and for sharing online. I included my contact information for calls and texting, and social media handles for Twitter and Facebook. I printed paper copies of the flyer to distribute through community organizations and to reach individuals who may not use or regularly access social media.

First, I distributed the flyer and a brief note via Facebook Messenger to many of my contacts on the Facebook social media platform, requesting that they share the flyer with their community networks. I emailed the flyer to several people I know from community organizations based in Greenville, asking them to share within the groups. These included NC Civil, Cancer Support Community, Youth for Change, PFLAG, and PICaSO. I also sent digital flyers to friends in Greenville who have large networks; these included a lesbian-identified white woman who moderates two online groups for lesbian women in eastern North Carolina and a queer Latinx woman who organizes events for the local LGBTQ+ community in Greenville.

I sent the flyer to NC-based organizations I followed on Twitter, and direct-messaged several national movement accounts I follow, asking that they share the flyer with (or provide me with contact info for) their local and/or regional affiliates. Then I went through my followers on Twitter, sending the flyer

along with a note to all who I knew had NC connections—including former residents of the state as well as faculty and graduate students at North Carolina institutions, and activists whose work covered the state. To reach out through campus networks, I also sent the flyer to contacts at the Ledonia Wright Cultural Center and the LGBTQ Resource Office and asked them to post and distribute the flyer on my behalf. Working from an online list of local nonprofit organizations, I emailed, tweeted, and filled out online contact forms to share the flyer and other information with access-focused arts organizations and with community organizations focused on advocacy for older adults, people with disabilities, and for people who are food- or housing-insecure. Some of these contacts were successful, and as a result hard-copy flyers were distributed by church groups, by an organization that provides emergency food boxes to local individuals and families, and by a community leader who was an active member of the Al-Masjid Islamic Center and Mosque in Greenville.

As interested individuals contacted me, I received Facebook messages, emails from other departments on campus, and a text from a former student who saw the flyer on Instagram. I also had potential participants approach me at public events, asking for more information about the project.

Organization and Scheduling. As part of collecting information from potential participants, I queried each person to indicate their preferred primary method of contact and offered a range of potential meeting times. Using the preferred contact information, I then contacted each participant to schedule initial individual interviews.

My initial plan was to identify a single meeting time that all participants could attend—and then have participants sometimes in conversation with each other in smaller groups—but the group of interested participants could not all meet at the same time. As a result, I identified two possible time slots—one weeknight and one weekend morning—that would, collectively, meet everyone’s availability, and decided to start two smaller writing groups that met at different times. This strategy allowed for more participants to be involved in the project, and offered some scheduling flexibility for participants with various other commitments to their work, school, family, faith community, and volunteer responsibilities. The group meeting schedule was twice-monthly for three months.

Then I scheduled individual interviews with each participant. I began these interviews by reviewing the informed consent document (Appendix C) with each participant, inviting them to read the document or have it read to them. I invited the participants to ask additional questions of me so they could be sure to have all questions answered before the interview began. Following this process, I then interviewed each of the participants. Those interviews began with turning on the recording program on my computer notebook and confirming verbally that each participant knew the interview was being recorded. Each interview included a sequential standard list of questions (Appendix D), with occasional rephrasing or follow-ups—all of which were designed to be open-ended and to encourage reflection.

I asked participants about themselves and the various facets of their identities, with the goal of collecting at least some demographic information—and, more importantly, to provide transparency about how various communities were represented (or not) among the study’s participants⁴⁰. The initial interviews also provided a framework for the later conversations about identity and writing that were discussed during the group meetings⁴¹.

I closed each initial interview with an invitation for the participant, asking them to contribute any additional information, and when participants indicated they were done with these final responses I shut off the recording. This open invitation at the end of the interview, which I made consistent practice during my time in journalism—and which I knew could provide significant additional insight—aligns with feminist methodological practices that privilege the words and ideas of the participants.

Data Collection. Following initial interviews, participants began attending group meetings, which were scheduled intermittently during October, November, and December of 2018. My research design encouraged participants to engage with each other, and the discussions at writing group meetings were minimally facilitated. This approach made space for conversations—and sometimes question-and-answer exchanges—between and among participants to be unscripted and free-flowing. These meetings opened with

⁴⁰ This was not a larger-*n* quantitative study, so I did not require participants to provide specific sets of demographic data.

⁴¹ For example, identities of class, age, gender, sexual orientation, size, education level, religious affiliation, and nationality shape subjectivity and influence “possibility” (Arditi, 2018), so it was important to me as a feminist researcher to offer the opportunity for participants to discuss any of these identities.

general discussion topics, and participants discussed the current writing projects they were engaged in. Most discussions began with some kind of prompt to kick off the conversation—such as “tell us a little bit about the writing you have done this week” or “I’m interested in hearing about how (or if) you represent yourself with technology tools when you write”—but I left the conversations open to allow for them to move in whatever direction they might organically go. At times, I also participated in the conversations, but the discussions were generally participant-led. Using open-ended discussion practice is a feminist approach that de-centers the concerns of the researcher, but the potential for almost anything to happen—including failure—is very much a queer methodology (Glasby, 2019; Halberstam, 2011; Kirsch, 2012; Waite, 2019) as well. Minimally facilitating informal discussions, open to the possibility of chaos and incoherence, rather than forcing a linear agenda on the group, is situated in queer and feminist practices (Jones Royster & Kirsch, 2012; Schell & Rawson, 2010; Waite, 2019).

Because of scheduling and other commitments, the attendance at various meetings (including myself as a researcher-participant group member) ranged from two to four people—and we never once all met as a group of five. Two meeting times each week, and some variable schedules that meant a ‘Saturday person’ might sometimes attend a Tuesday meeting and vice versa, made for one fluid group rather than two separate groups⁴². The conversation topics sometimes overlapped a bit, but the fluidity also meant that most pairings of group members eventually included some one-on-one discussions. I recorded all or most of three different meeting sessions, as planned; two of which had at least three people (and included Tuesday and Saturday people) attending for most of those meetings.

Another wide-open form of data collection for this project was my decision to wait for participants to discuss their writing projects as they thought of them and found them relevant to the conversations. This began almost immediately, as at the very first meeting the writers began discussing the work they were doing and the inspirations they drew on for writing. By allowing the writers to identify the texts and artifacts they view as important—rather than me asking them to provide specific genre forms based on my own

⁴² I also created an online tool in Qualtrics for participants to use if they wanted to do periodic online commentary to supplement their participation in the face-to-face group meetings, but none of the participants used this interface at all. This was true even during a week when they were unable to attend all or part of a writing group meeting.

priorities—the participants led me to genre forms I would not have even thought to ask about. In some cases, participants also voluntarily brought examples of their work to the writing group and offered me the opportunity to photograph or review their documents. One participant brought in a current bullet journal, another added me to a social media chat group they moderated, and another brought in fellowship application materials, a grant draft, and other proposal documents.

I transcribed one of the initial interviews myself, but that process reminded me of just how difficult I find that work, so I contracted out the rest of the transcription work. The professional transcriptionists rarely marked paralinguistic cues, but a few prolonged audible sighs and extended pauses have been noted. Laughing, especially the laughter⁴³ that broke out in writing group meetings, was often noted in the transcripts.

Data Analysis. I used induction as my primary method of data analysis, with open coding to discover common themes and engage with the words and values of project participants. I used NVivo 12 Pro software for all coding. Induction allowed me to build from data toward themes and categories (Creswell, 2009) by seeking similarities and commonalities based on answers to open questions. This analysis first explored what the participants said they did (RQ1) and what they said about connections they made between their actions and identity (RQ3) and/or context (RQ4). Later in the process, my analysis focused on what participants did (RQ1) and how and why the participants used specific strategies (RQ2).

After conducting initial interviews, attending (and recording) the writing group meetings, I first coded the data from the initial interviews to look for common themes, and—at least in part because of the focus of those interviews—easily identified *context* and *identities* as recurring. I also identified *motivation* (for activism and for writing) as a common theme. I then coded the topical interviews and recorded discussions from writing group meetings, looking for extensions of those themes and for specific discussion of genre-fluid moves writers made in their writing processes.

⁴³ One participant, M'J, laughs often and has particularly infectious laughter, and his unique infusion of Black Joy into the interviews and conversations has been retained to a large degree.

Next I sorted the data on identities and genre forms by individual participants to explore views of the data to develop the first drafts of individual case study profiles. As part of that case study analysis, I used a phenomenological approach to examine the terms each participant applied when describing their identities; this led me to focus on the two descriptors each participant used most often to describe themselves and that they connected to conversations about their writing and activism. These participant descriptions were:

feminist + educator
public servant + progressive
librarian + academic
Black + queer

I reviewed the topical interviews and recorded group discussions to reinforce my impression of each set of descriptors as accurate, and I also confirmed these pairings—which I have framed each case study with—with each study participant as appropriate descriptions.

A second round of coding focused on how participants described their composing processes and on noting the range of genre forms used by participants. In that coding, I looked for mentions of writing processes in interviews and in group conversations, focusing on times when participants outlined steps in their drafting, writing, and editing—especially when working on unfamiliar writing projects. This coding focused on writing studies concepts of *cognition* and *metacognition* (Bazerman, 2012; Taczak, 2015), *habituated practice* (Anson, 2015), and *resistance* (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011; Waite, 2019). At that point I also noticed an additional theme of *values* (that is, personal beliefs that prompted their work and reinforced their motivations) recurring in these discussions.

More Data Collection. For the final round of data collection, I conducted individual final interviews with each participant. Using a standard question list (Appendix E), I pegged a significant portion of the questions in these last interviews to the primary identities my analysis generated for each participant. Having confirmed the pairs of primary identities for each participant, I began those interviews with each participant by reconfirming those identity terms as appropriate, and framed the early questions in those final interviews around these sets of identities. In the final interviews I also repeated certain questions from the initial interview round, to explore whether the participants would answer those questions differently; and I

included questions about their experiences with the community writing group and how participation might have changed their perceptions or their writing.

Getting those last four interviews turned into something of a perpetual Murphy's Law carousel. Exactly one of the four final interviews was as planned: a straightforward face-to-face interview with one continuous recording. Due to a range of factors—including more than one of us having a family member pass—every other interview had some sort of snag. One participant's final interview was only partially recorded, because at some point in the interview the recording function on my computer notebook glitched and shut off. In that case, beginning again where the first recording shut off, we repeated the rest of the interview. I discovered the problem when I examined a recording transcript and learned the recording had shut off, which was a real loss. I am sure that the repetition lost some of the insight and freshness that the first version of the interview had. (And, I believe both of us were a bit distracted the second time around by a compulsion to continually do a visual check on the recording app to ensure it was still working.) Another final interview ended up being conducted using synchronous chat-style typing in a shared online document. The fourth final interview—after multiple near-misses as well as a disconnected phone, an illness, tough schedules, and other barriers—ended up being conducted via email: I sent the list of questions to the participant, and a few days later got a return email that included the questions and responses.

More Analysis. These final interviews were also coded using the same themes and commonalities previously identified. I then conducted more inductive analysis, examining similarities between first and last interview responses, and exploring commonalities across the impact statements. Where I found similar responses and strategies for two participants and contrasting similarities for the other two, I looked for commonalities in identities or experiences that could potentially suggest the causes for those differences. I also used data visualization techniques for studying some aspects of the data collected, including creating word clouds⁴⁴ from transcribed participant responses.

⁴⁴ A *word cloud* is a chart created from text data, often gathered into a cluster or cloud shape, where words or phrases used more frequently appear larger (or, in some case, in deeper colors). It is a visual aid that can spotlight recurring keywords. One example of a word cloud I created appears earlier in this chapter, where all the self-referential identity terms used for all participants were collected into a single word cloud.

Then I went back to the full data set for another comprehensive look. I created word clouds based just on terms used for self-identity, which I used earlier in this chapter to represent the collective range of terms participants used to describe themselves. I also made identity term word clouds for each study participant, which revealed that some participants used more different terms and other participants used fewer terms more often. These visuals, particularly for identity terms, were helpful when induction suggested similarities between pairs of participants rather than across the entire group. Based on my two-part definition of genre fluidity I reviewed the data set to make determinations about whether individual participants engaged in genre-fluid work, and if so which of the strategies they have used.

CHAPTER WRAP-UP

Following my Chapter 1, which defines important terms and concepts as well as providing a review of the literature from rhetorical genre studies, and a second chapter focused on specific genre-fluid writers, this third chapter has used theorizing to connect identity and culture to the writing that writers *do*, rather than to the written texts they create. I began with my understanding of rhetorical knowledge- and meaning-making, and then theorized identity as a framework for praxis. Focusing on embodiment and intersectionality, I framed identity as both internally developed and externally imposed. I also described the queer feminist methodologies that built on this theorizing and shaped my project design.

These methodologies—the systemic theoretical underpinnings of my research—are the principles that prompted my research questions and the project design. These feminist methodologies also shaped my approach to research, with the goal of de-centering institutional power, acknowledging purported objectivity as less than ideal, and engaging in transformative meaning-making. Lastly, I described the methods used in my research for this dissertation project, including organizing and scheduling interviews, recording interviews and selected group discussions, and coding and analyzing the collected data.

In the remaining chapters, I present the data I have collected through this participatory and phenomenological project's methods and provide my analysis of that data. In Chapter 4, I describe the geographical and socio-political context for eastern North Carolina, using the frame of Walsh's (2015)

definition of identity—or the naming of important “lived experience[s] of marginalization” (p. 62)—to describe the context in which the writer-activists who participated in the study were working and writing. Chapter 5 consists of four case study profiles created to center the words and individual personalities of the project participants, with particular focus on the intersection of identities and the genre-fluid writing strategies they employ.

Chapter 6 focuses on the collective work and recorded conversations of the writing group and provides more analysis of this data. It also discusses how community writing groups may provide opportunities for writers to engage with each other about their writing and suggests potential benefits of community writing groups as sites of engagement that can facilitate expanding individual participation in sites of public discourse. Finally, Chapter 7 highlights my conclusions about writing and identity in context, for rhetorical disciplines and activists, and it calls for further research in genre fluidity.

CHAPTER 4—WRITING IN PLACE: COMPLEXITIES AND CONTEXTS

My first chapter defined and explored multiple facets of genre fluidity through writing studies and rhetorical genre studies scholarship, along with defining critical terms and concepts and providing a literature review. My second chapter features examples of writers whose work is emblematic of genre fluidity. The third chapter theorized identity as an embodied and intersectional framework for praxis, and detailed my methodologies and methods.

In this fourth chapter, I discuss the contexts within which the study participants work, live and engage in activism. This contextualization sets the stage for Chapter 5, which provides case studies for each of the writing group participants, focusing on analysis of data collected from individual interviews at the beginning and end of the study. Chapter 6 presents more data from my research, the recorded conversations from some writing group meetings, and Chapter 7 concludes with more analysis, framed as interpretations and conclusions about genre fluidity that arise from the many contributions of this project's participants.

I begin this chapter with a contextual description of the culture—the historical, geographical, and socio-political place that is eastern North Carolina. I do this work to frame the cultural contexts within which the four writing group participants write as well as live, work, and engage in activism, because where an individual comes from has profound implications, tangible and intangible (Arditi, 2015; Cedillo, 2017; Bourdieu, 1991/2014). I give significant attention to the influence context can have on writers, and use this quote from writing studies scholarship to frame the contextual description that this next section provides:

Each writer is unique: indeed, each writer is a combination of the collective set of different dimensions and traits and features that make us human.

Writers, developing in the contexts of family, schooling, and culture, continue that development as they write in increasingly multiple and varying contexts—of larger personal relationship structures, in workplace sites, in the civic sphere, and in cultural contexts that themselves are always changing. (Blake Yancey, 2015, p. 52)

The place(s) we come from can be cultural, generational, experiential, philosophical, disciplinary, spiritual, and more—and when I use the term *context* in the discussion of my research questions, I draw on Blake Yancey’s inclusion of relationships, workplaces, civic and cultural spaces, as well as socio-political contexts—but understanding context as *place* is also about geographical location and the history of the places. For writers engaged in the work of writing for advocacy, the contexts where this writing is done are important to consider. The literal context in which my research participants live is one where social and economic justice are vital priorities.

In the case of the participants in this study, eastern North Carolina was the place, and the time was 2018-2019. This was in the years following North Carolina’s divisive HB2 (an anti-trans, anti-queer, anti-working-class bill that generated controversy and sparked outrage from multiple communities); it also was a time when sexual predators and #MeToo stories were daily news topics around the world. In the U.S., white nationalist ideology and hate speech were coming out from under the hoods (so to speak), and anti-immigrant sentiments and mistreatment of migrants and refugees were becoming ever-more virulent. Across the U.S., terrorist violence—often overtly racist, misogynist, and tinged with white nationalism—regularly made the news. In a state with a long history of racist oppression enacted in part by violence and systemic voter suppression, and where generational poverty has been equally deeply entrenched, these were not just slightly unsettling times for participants in the writing group. These were the daily, material realities in which the participants lived and worked. Of course, these were times with good news, on personal as well as regional, national, and international levels, but these systems and headlines illustrate the need for activist work participants engaged in.

In every case, these writer-activists had identities, visible or otherwise, that were specifically impacted by these issues in that time and place. In the group of four writers, two were queer, two were women, and three identified health challenges—from mental health issues to HIV—that frequently impacted them. In addition, the group included Black, Chicana, Muslim, and learning-disabled participants. One was from a mixed-citizenship-status family, at least one participant had recently experienced housing insecurity, and at least one participant was a sexual assault survivor. None were from backgrounds with significant financial

means, though some had more resources than others, and two were full time students with part-time incomes. These multiple, intersecting, and sometimes embodied identities meant that each participant experienced the time and place they lived differently. These identities sometimes were directly connected to the activism and advocacy work that study participants were invested in.

Even while the participants in this study were meeting for the writing group, many events and cultural shifts made 2018 and 2019 difficult times in eastern North Carolina. These events frequently impacted the individual lives of research participants, and in some cases made attending writing group meetings difficult. The divisive 2018 election meant one participant was incredibly busy organizing and fundraising on behalf of local and statewide candidates. In addition, Hurricane Florence disrupted and displaced many in eastern North Carolina in the fall of 2018. One participant's uncle lost everything he owned—including important prescription medications—except for the clothes the uncle was wearing when his neighborhood was evacuated, and the participant was very involved in helping their uncle find housing, clothing, food, medications, and everything else.

The rising visibility of white nationalism and the continuing income disparities in the United States pervade the lives of everyone with marginalized racial and class identities—whether the impact was immediate and material or not. The images of small refugee children separated from their families and places in metal cages, frightened and crying, combined with anti-Latinx and anti-immigrant sentiments, disturbed many U.S. citizens—but mixed-status and immigrant families doubtless found this even more distressing than those of us with citizenship or residency status. Sexual assault survivors have been required to expend enormous emotional energy to maintain resilience during days of public testimony related to a Supreme Court nomination and the near-daily deluge of #MeToo stories. At least one participant in this research project had experienced homelessness within the past year, and weeks of a federal government shutdown meant one participant lost significant income. These many challenges have meant the context for participants is about *how* they live—including the surrounding chaos—as well as *where* they live.

As part of this discussion of context, I draw on Spinuzzi's (2017) assertion that work is sustained "through communities and cultures" (p. 277) rather than existing in neatly delineated professional spaces. In other words, the community spaces and cultural spaces where writers work are at least as diverse as the physical spaces where work is done.

Cedillo (2017) wrote of "home place" as simultaneously encompassing culture, language, and technology. These contexts where writers are 'at home' include many sites, both literal and figurative, extend beyond specific buildings or areas of municipal zoning. For Swartz (2012), these places where rhetoric happens have become "sites of power, authority, and strategy" (para. 31); and Alvarez and colleagues (2017) have argued that the processes and products of rhetoric are inseparable from the "bodies" of "composers," "consumers, readers, and viewers" (n.p.). In discussing the contexts for writers participating in this project, I deliberately make use of this expansive understanding of what a workplace is and can be. As activists, their work is located within a specific community in a specific region. The participants in the writing group were working in a place where their advocacy—for queer human rights, racial equality, economic parity, and justice for abuse survivors—directly responded to contemporary and historical contexts.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE CHECK

In conceptualizing the labor of activists, paid or unpaid, and that of community organizers and volunteers as *work*, I further encompass uncompensated efforts in domestic (Federici, 1975) as well as personal, faith-based, activist, and performing arts spaces, among others as workplaces.

While some communities may reject terms such as *work* (or even *labor*) to describe the rhetorical activities and activist communication they engage in—and I agree that a different term or constellation of terms might be more appropriate to describe these rhetorical acts—my use of the term *work* in this definition is deliberate, as I intentionally push against the notion that the only valued labor is compensated labor and that the only communication worthy of being labeled technical or professional is that which is done by individuals who are trained, credentialed, licensed, and compensated by public or private organizations (Savage, 2004). And the same is true of the concept of *business communication*, which is broader than the language of commerce, because all kinds of organizations have business they conduct to continue operating. Community organizations and nonprofits, for example, communicate internally as well as with stakeholders in many of the same ways for-profit enterprises do.

After all, I am part of communities engaged in work (here's that word again) that we might call something else: living out our values; seeking truth; changing the world; queering the everyday; walking our path; or speaking truth to power. We also irritate and educate; afflict the comfortable; challenge the capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchy; take care of the family; pay it forward; and give back.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BUILDING

I view *business communication* quite broadly, understanding what constitutes a workplace or work space as much more than a commercial, retail, manufacturing, or other 'business' location where we go to work for pay. All organizations have business operations, whether or not they exist for the purpose of earning or extracting profit. This view about what counts as a workplace was one I held before 'gig economy' and 'remote work' became popular terms, and it certainly holds true as I prepare to defend this dissertation during a pandemic that has displaced workers in some segments of the economy⁴⁵ who previously were employed in congregate workplaces.

⁴⁵ Chiefly, this COVID-19 displacement has been white collar and pink collar professional employment. Workers in food service and retail, factory workers and farm laborers, delivery and personal services providers, health care providers, and many similar kinds of employment have been too often been forced to continue to work at great risk to their health (or to not work at all). And even for

Being in a separate place—away from home, family, or community—and being paid for what we do in that place has never been what delineates professional or work spaces. Indeed, that assumed distinction often has gendered, classed, and raced implications that devalue certain forms of labor and certain laborers; this is especially true for domestic, caregiving, and volunteer work (Federici, 1975; 2018). My own early view of work was not of something that happened somewhere else; for example, from hand-lacing custom furniture to quilting, my grandparents' living room was a work space. As I eventually moved toward professional endeavors tied to writing and speaking, I still did much of that work from my own living space as a freelancer and sole proprietor. Further, I did not always associate work with wages or earnings, either, as there were times when my family worked 'on shares' for landowners but there were no earnings to speak of. And with limited resources, bartering labor and home-crafted or home-grown goods was a familiar practice.

Rather than approaching this project with a narrowly defined understanding of what is included as professional space, I recognize that the workplace of a rhetorician may be understood as quite broad: wherever we are, wherever we come from, and wherever we engage in the crafting of and the expression of our message(s) *is* our workplace. These sites of rhetorical effort—habitus (Bourdieu, 1991/2014; Ahmed, 2006), home place (Cedillo, 2017), inhabited spaces (Ahmed, 2006), for example—are physical spaces and are much more. They constitute where we come from and where we live in metaphorical as well as literal terms, including our embodied identity (Ahmed, 2006; Cedillo, 2017; Gonçalves, 2005; Kramarae, 1989), point of view (Burke, 1966), and cultural connections (Alvarez and colleagues, 2017; Wills, 2006).

Thus, for example, under this broader definition of work, the rhetorical acts of organizers and other advocates—in eastern North Carolina as well as in Flint and Detroit and Baltimore, at Black Lives Matter and Siding With Love events, on social media with #SayHerName and #MeToo posts, at Standing Rock and other sites where Water Protectors are engaged, volunteering for the Innocence Project or the Equal Justice Initiative, or March(ing) for Our Lives—are all business and professional communication.

The geographical context for this project is eastern North Carolina, where outsiders are sometimes jokingly told that this is the only Carolina big enough to have an eastern side. Eastern North Carolina (sometimes referred to as ENC) is very much its own place, even within the state, in terms of economics, politics, and culture—and because of their individual identities, participants in my community writing group have been specifically impacted by issues related to class, sexuality, and race. The brief discussion that follows speaks to those particular contexts as illustrated by the state's persistent poverty rates, the so-called bathroom bill of 2016, and systemic practices of voter suppression and gerrymandering. This contextual discussion is not intended to imply there are not plenty of great things about living in Eastern North Carolina and in the City of Greenville where East Carolina University is located. Indeed, there are many—including the relaxed atmosphere, a vibrant arts community, a number of great restaurants offering a range of cuisines, many

many in the lower and middle tiers of the professional class, the dislocations have meant that domestic and educational labor are now piled atop (and in the same locations as) the professional labor—and that the work is unequally distributed in ways that are gendered as well as classed. This is not an economics dissertation, of course, but in the context of my work and the lenses through which I examine inequities, deserves the subject deserves mention nonetheless.

cultural events, and a location that is within driving distance of both the mountains and the beach. Because my study participants engage in activism on social and economic justice issues, and their identities meant regular experiences with—or close proximity to—injustices based on class, gender, sexuality, and race, the ENC contexts spotlighted here are those that have negative impacts.

Within the United States, the South is the census region with the highest poverty levels, both by percentage of the population and by raw numbers (University of California-Davis, 2016). Additionally, “non-metropolitan areas,” as designated by the U.S. Census—which includes Greenville—have higher percentage rates of poverty than population centers the census defines as metropolitan areas (University of California-Davis). Both trends hold true in this case: eastern North Carolina is a high poverty area.

In the first congressional district, where Greenville is located, 21.1 percent of the population has an income below the federal poverty rate, which is \$24,860 per year for a household of four (Center for American Progress, 2018b). Greenville is in Pitt County, and 24.5 percent of the households in the county live below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2018a). Greenville itself has 32 percent of its residents below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2018b). For comparison, the U.S. state with the highest poverty level, at 19.8 percent, is Mississippi (Center for American Progress, 2018a); every single one of these ENC numbers are higher.

Another important contextual factor in contemporary eastern North Carolina is the controversy related to the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (2016), better known as North Carolina’s House Bill 2 or as the “bathroom bill.” The legislation generated significant controversy for its attempts to require public restrooms statewide be segregated according to the biological sex “stated on a person’s birth certificate” (Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, 2016), raising the volume of public discourse on the subject of civil rights for LGBTQ+ people—particularly for people who are transgender or nonbinary. For the queer participants in the study, one engaged in advocacy for queer and trans BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) and one mentoring queer college students, this issue was of daily relevancy.

While the legislation drew national attention (Faussett, 2017) to real problems as well as manufactured fears related to gender-segregated public restrooms—particularly since gender identity and

gender presentation are not the same as sex, and since the gender spectrum encompasses more than two genders on a single binary—the full name of the bill reveals HB2 had a much wider focus. Named “An Act to Provide for Single-sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations,” the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (2016) included provisions prohibiting municipalities within the state from passing local laws “related to commerce.”

Specifically, the local acts that HB2 deemed “subjects of concern” and not permissible “under the police power of the State” were laws banning discrimination against LGBTQ+-identified individuals in employment and public accommodations *and* laws raising the minimum wage (Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, 2016). Overtly and obviously about keeping gender minorities out of school bathrooms for the supposed “Privacy & Security” of everyone else—which I believe the bill’s sponsors intended to distract from its secondary purpose—House Bill 2 was also about suppressing civil rights statutes and workers’ rights legislation statewide. Eventually partially repealed, although partially replaced in a “compromise” that disallows any local civil rights ordinances protecting sexual and gender minorities until at least 2020 (Faussett, 2017), HB2’s wage-suppression measures are not state law. In eastern North Carolina, where higher wages could potentially benefit many households, no local municipalities have as yet raised the minimum wage.

Along with economic adversity and the deep divisions in the wake of HB2, access to voting rights is another issue that has shaped ENC contexts. While only one study participant engaged in political activism at the level of campaigning and direct voter canvassing, the working class and poverty class backgrounds as well as the racial identities of some writing group members meant they come from and work in communities where voter suppression has deep roots. For the writer-activists engaged in advocacy for Black, brown, queer, and poor people as well as those working for gender equity, the everyday and consequential realities for the communities they work with—and often are part of—have made disenfranchisement a perpetually critical issue.

The history of voter suppression in eastern North Carolina is as old as Reconstruction’s ostensible suffrage for formerly enslaved Black men. Tucked between reports celebrating growth of the tobacco market,

noting municipal purchases of horses to pull fire wagons, and detailing society events—and described with equally breezy tones—newspaper stories in the years following the Civil War presage the decades of disenfranchisement and voter suppression that followed official emancipation and male suffrage.

A compilation of circa-1900 newspaper articles provides one slice of evidence from this history. On October 18, 1898, according to Jenkins (1965), the weekly *Eastern Reflector* reported that a “Mass meeting of white people [had been] called...for the purpose of taking into consideration the political and social conditions of the east” (p.35). That same issue described the campaign tactics of white-only community groups, and the following week’s paper reported that the “Greenville White Government Union held a meeting in the courthouse” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 35). Further organizing was reported on October 24, Jenkins’ compilation reveals, and according to the *Eastern Reflector*’s November 5 edition, “a large meeting of white men [met] at the courthouse” to discuss preventing voter “frauds that are being attempted” so as to “assure a fair election” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 36). Following the 1898 election, the *Reflector* announced “a speaking and torch light procession celebrating...that glorious victory for white supremacy” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 36), and then picked up a story from the *Raleigh News and Observer* reporting that the Charter of Greenville’s repeal meant “the town of Greenville is once more in the hands of white men” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 38). The April 3, 1899, edition of the (now-*Daily*) *Reflector* asserted that “White Supremacy [has been] made permanent” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 39).

After the turn of the century, the *Reflector* remained the daily newspaper of Greenville, and continued matter-of-fact reporting reminders of systemic disenfranchisement. Along with glowing obituaries praising the heroism and gallantry of former Confederate soldiers—and multiple stories reporting the differences in salaries paid to Black and white public educators—the paper covered a minstrel performance that “please[d] a large audience...with stories of the glorious pre-war days” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 65) and a stage performance of *The Clansman* that played to “an immense audience,” including “a number of ex-Confederate soldiers to whom were brought back vivid recollections of the trying reconstruction period through which they passed” (Jenkins, 1965, p. 77). While eastern North Carolina was by no means the only part of the U.S. where this kind of white supremacist history can be found, examples such as these do provide a historic context that illuminates the entrenched racial inequalities across this region.

As federal court cases and national legislation expanded voting rights over the decades since that play about the Klan was reportedly so popular, North Carolina became more and more gerrymandered, continuing a pattern of disenfranchising African Americans. This ever-shifting but always systematic suppression of voting rights has resulted in some of the most convoluted congressional maps in the United States; the Princeton Gerrymandering Project (2020) described North Carolina as “one of the most extremely gerrymandered states in the nation” even after numerous lawsuits focused on undoing racial gerrymandering. Multiple cases related to this state’s gerrymandering have reached the U.S. Supreme Court, and eastern North Carolina is so far the only place where major voter fraud from the 2018 election has been prosecuted (Gardner & Wagner, 2019). Even by North Carolina standards, 2018-2019 was quite a time for political upheaval, including “a serious case of voter fraud that rendered an entire election illegitimate; legal battles over gerrymandered maps and voter ID laws; and corruption“ (Rosenberg, 2019, para. 2). When combined with long-term and widespread economic challenges, North Carolina’s history of voter suppression and political gerrymandering has resulted in significant gaps in civil rights statutes that have ongoing material consequences for the communities where this study’s participants live and work.

The community writing group members who participated in this project were geographically situated (in Greenville, in Pitt County, and in eastern North Carolina) and their efforts and identities were situated in the broader public sphere. Both the history of the area and the disruptions and political upheaval reflected in public discourse—as discussed in this chapter—are significant contexts for each participant. In Chapter 5, I present case studies that discuss each participant in the study.

CHAPTER 5—CASE STUDIES: FOUR ACTIVISTS WRITING FOR CHANGE

Everything I have, I breathe to write.
-Allie

I want to be complete. I want to be thorough.
I want to provide a reference for others that are interested in the future.
-Dave

Writing is a form of self-expression.
It's a way to help define who you are, and the direction that you're going in life...
your advancements, and successes, and even your failures.
-J

Communication. Sharing ideas. Expressing oneself.
That's what writing is about.
-M'J

In Chapter 4, I provided a detailed discussion of the complex contexts within which the writing group participants live and write and advocate for social and economic justice. In this chapter, I foreground the participants in the project.

These case studies, which comprise Chapter 5, provide thick descriptions of each participant, co-narrate their experiences as activist-writers during this time period, and illustrate how activists use writing—including writing their identities—to work toward their goals. This thick description has been used to learn more about the experiences of individual participants and examine how those experiences respond to, rather than answer, the project's research questions (Baird & Dilger, 2017). While case studies can vary quite a bit from discipline to discipline as well as from project to project and researcher to researcher (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), my version of these reflects the way my work—as a queer feminist cultural rhetorics project—lies at the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences. Case study profiles are

appropriate for this intersection, as they are fundamentally narratives,⁴⁶ or stories about people. Case studies tell stories, presenting findings of a research project, and typically are used—as I do in this dissertation—in ways that deepen the conclusions and interpretations of study data.

As chronological, descriptive writing, case studies are written to illustrate a concept, claim, or theory in epistemic ways⁴⁷ (Ruzzene, 2012). My case studies of research participants do three things: they underscore stories as knowledge-making ways in cultural rhetorics; they study writing by shifting from process or product to focusing almost exclusively on writers and identity; and they enact feminist principles by centering the words of the writer-participants. Case studies are often designed to be “rich in detail and to represent faithfully the complexity of the object [sic] of interest” and each can serve as “a reservoir of local knowledge that becomes evidentially useful” in the understanding of overall research results (Ruzzene, 2014, p. 14). This foregrounding of individual stories makes for a rich and complex presentation of the study’s results, which address my research questions:

RQ1: What genre-fluid strategies do writers enact in their writing contexts?

RQ2: How and why do writers employ these strategies when they write?

RQ3: What role does identity play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

RQ4: What role does context play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

I close each case study by returning to each of these research questions. Providing an individual focus on the participants connects their experiences with the questions, addressing these questions that can aid in understanding genre fluidity.

The specific case studies that follow are largely based on individual interviews⁴⁸ with members of the writing group, conducted at the beginning and end of the study. They illustrate (sometimes literally) the

⁴⁶ See Powell (2012) and King (2005) for important cultural rhetorics work on the power of stories. See also Small (2017) on the value of storytelling in technical and professional communication. There is much more work on this, and on counter-story as a methodology, but these texts are a great place to start.

⁴⁷ Ruzzene (2012; 2014) has done excellent and exhaustive work on case studies and their extensive value to researchers and the advancement of research in social science.

⁴⁸ Transcripts of interviews and recorded conversations have been lightly edited for clarity, including removing some repetitive verbal tics (such as, for example, my tendency to start many sentences and questions with “So,” “And,” or “I mean”) and hesitations (such as “um”) or repetitions (such as restarting sentences by restating the first few words). Also worth mentioning at the beginning of these case studies: I have resisted ‘standardizing’ English usage or grammar—of my own or of any participants—as a deliberate refusal to value a specific raced/classed dialect over other equally effective dialectical English(es). And except for extended pauses

identities, stories, and words of the participants. These case study profiles are written with thick description, purposefully, as a way to establish a baseline for where—and who—they were when the study began as well as how they changed over time. Along with changes—some personal, some professional, and some contextual—that could be expected for individuals over time, the case studies include discussion of how the study impacted them and their work as writers and activists.

I am immensely grateful to them for sharing their stories and thoughts with me and—through the resulting work—also generously sharing their experiences with scholars in a range of academic disciplines that stem from the mother discipline of rhetoric. The commitments to social and economic justice these participants embody offer us much, including challenge, inspiration, and insight.

ALLIE: FEMINIST AND EDUCATOR

Allie⁴⁹ is a straight, cis, Latinx woman in her mid-twenties, petite and curvy, white-coded, and at the beginning of this project she had recently become engaged. She grew up speaking Portuguese and Spanish as well as English, and first learned reading and writing in Portuguese because of where she first went to school. In her mixed-language and mixed- and multi-racial family, some family members only speak one language, so even as a child she was sometimes the translator. The same academic year I was conducting this study, she was completing a bachelor's degree in both English and English Education at East Carolina University. During the period the writing group met, she was completing the last of her undergrad coursework and had begun a classroom practicum in preparation for a semester of student teaching. At the beginning of the study, Allie was a fulltime college student who worked with other student writers in the university writing center, and by the time we met for the last interview, she was teaching writing to high school students. Allie is an activist whose projects have included organizing rallies and social media work, especially related to gender

or bouts of laughter that interrupted speech, most nonverbal cues are not included in the transcripts. In general I have not used ellipses in passages edited for clarity or brevity; the exceptions indicate sentences that have been combined or partially elided.

⁴⁹ "Allie" is a pseudonym. While family members and some community members might recognize her based on a close reading of this case study, she does not use this name in employment, academic, or activist contexts. As someone applying for public high school teacher jobs at the time the study began—and as a current public school teacher—she and I agreed to use "Allie" in all publications and presentations related to this project.

justice, reproductive rights, and in opposition to sexual violence. She also works part-time as a director of youth religious education⁵⁰ for a local faith community.

Allie and I knew each other prior to the start of the study, though not necessarily well. We had interacted in professional, community, and academic spaces; and with both of us living in the same city, attending the same university and in the same department, it was not surprising we were acquainted with each other. The community is small enough that I have met her fiancé, and once ended up sharing a shift on a volunteer project with her sister. I had heard Allie speak in more than one venue: reading an academic paper at an international conference, speaking at a local rally (where I saw it hosted live on social media), and giving a talk about music that has deeply impacted her life. On these occasions, I heard her as a presenter with a quiet, strong voice and an authentic delivery. In those instances where I saw her in front of an audience, she always had prepared written texts for reference when speaking—rather than extemporizing full stop—so she was an acquaintance I knew well enough to know she was both a writer and speaker. I also followed her on social media (Twitter and Facebook) prior to the beginning of the study, so I knew something of her persona in those digital spaces as well.



Figure 2 - Inside cover of Allie's bullet journal

⁵⁰ When signing up to participate in this study, Allie was a staff member who reported to a professional clergyperson with administrative responsibilities at that congregation, and I had recently been elected president of the board of trustees. We had no professional relationship at that time. During the course of the study (due to the clergyperson's contract not being renewed), the congregation's staff came under the supervision of the board of trustees, but at no point during the research was I part of an employee evaluation or contract renewal process for Allie. My term on the board ended approximately one year prior to the defense of this dissertation.

Our first interview took place on a Saturday, in the classroom where she works as a youth religious educator. Dressed casually, with her hair tied up, she seemed excited to get started. At that initial interview (which included a discussion about identity beyond “writer/non-writer”), Allie first asked for some clarity about what “other than” meant exactly, and then described herself in several different ways. The following exchange from that first interview, where I had asked her about her identity as “other than” a writer, demonstrated (just as the scholarship reviewed earlier in this dissertation suggests) the complexity of identity was, for her, both externally imposed and inwardly driven:

Ruby: You already said, “I’m an English teacher.” Identity is kind of one of those weird things because it’s partly what you do, but it’s also partly who you are. So, I’m looking for some of both in that.

Allie: What that made me think of was statuses that I have and so—in terms of inscribed statuses, like the ones that I’ve had since birth. I’m a woman. I identify as a woman. I am, racially and ethnically, I’m mixed. I’m Brazilian and Italian and I’ve lived in the U.S. and Brazil.

I have dual citizenship and I’ve kind of got a weird idea of what my identity is, culturally, because I don’t really fit into either category, but I’m also kind of both. So, it’s a weird area to be in, something I’m constantly working on and writing about.

I’m a young adult. I just turned 25 years old. I think that’s pretty important to my identity. In terms of what I’ve experienced in the last 25 years of human shared history and experience and things like that. Like I said, I’m a teacher. I’m a daughter. I’m a sister. I’m a partner. I’m engaged. What else am I? I don’t know. I’m feeling actually anxious trying to think about this, feel what I am!

Based on this self-description, Allie connected her identity to “inscribed statuses” including gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. She also identified herself by her age, her work, and her relationships with family members. In those last lines, Allie also spoke to how she was feeling in that moment, and in doing so she also (but not necessarily deliberately, in this particular moment) identified herself as a person with anxiety.

During further discussion at that first interview, she expanded her descriptions of her identity, including identifying as an undergraduate, as a poet and public speaker, and as a strong communicator. Her descriptions of herself a writer (and rhetorician) were woven throughout conversations about her writing:

Allie: I definitely find that my identities play a lot in my writing. I’m currently an undergrad and in education conversations with other people who are in the field of education or intend to be. I find that my identity [is] as a mixed-race person and as a woman and as sometimes a little older than the group that I’m with, or a little younger. My writing fits into that in really different ways. So, I have different insights to offer.

I bring different funds of knowledge to the table and I've learned a lot about how to embrace others' funds of knowledge, too. That's a big part of my writing. I like to think of it as conversation, not ever as a lecture or a monologue. I think it takes place in this kind of larger vacuum of—well, not a vacuum, just larger, just discussion.

In terms of being a daughter or a sister or a friend or a partner and all of these things, writing has a big place for that, too. Because that's communication and I think that my writing and being in love with my writing has helped me be a really strong communicator in my relationships, in my personal relationships.

Ruby: What kind of writer are you? You said you're an effective one. You said you're a good one, you're a strong one. What other kinds of writer are you?

Allie: Well, I've grown a lot as a writer. I'd like to think that I'm kind of an elastic writer. I go through different periods and I can identify going through different parts where I'll have flourishes of writing where I'm just feeling like a crazy person. I can't possibly ever write enough and then dry spells where I'm like, "Oh, wow. I haven't written in a couple of days." And then I kind of beat myself up about it because I'm like, "that's not who I am. What is it? Who am I?" And then I spiral.

I'm a poet. I'm a public speaker. I'm a community member and activist and I think all of that plays into my writing because they aren't identities that I leave at the door. I carry those with me and obviously, you can't always put everything into one piece, but they definitely show up in really interesting ways.

As an activist, Allie's focus was on the goal she described as empowering people for the purposes of transformation in individuals and communities. When asked in the initial interview about what she hopes to accomplish with her activism, she described this goal as a "revelation." She immediately asked about the appropriateness of her response, and—once she got a very small bit of confirmation from me—continued to try to describe what she hopes to achieve:

Allie: A revelation. Is that silly?

Ruby: I don't— You're not supposed to ask me questions!

[laughter]

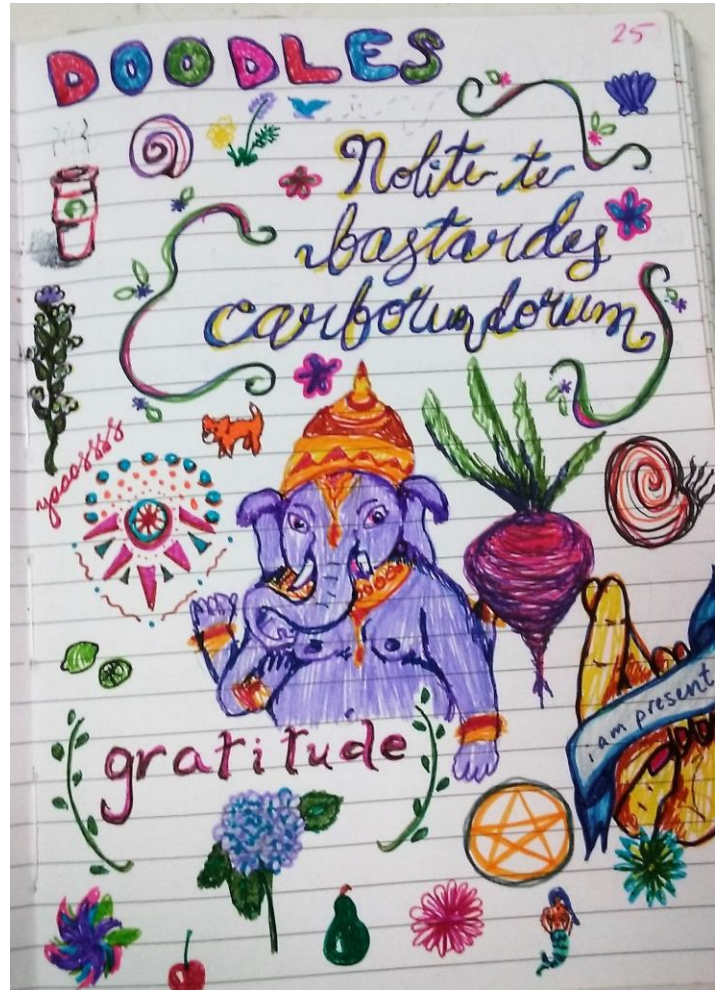
Ruby: No, I don't happen to think that's silly at all. Or I probably wouldn't be here having this conversation.

Allie: That's what I want.

Ruby: Okay. You want to achieve a revelation?

Allie: Yeah. I want to— I think that writing is one of the things that empowers people. It transforms individuals and communities and it can transform a lot. I think it's only one part obviously, but it's a big one and I think it's one that kind of crosses a lot of lines in terms of— well, I guess more of, not crosses, but reaches across, different areas.

Allie asserted communication, with connection and understanding between people, as the clear path to that revelation and transformation she wants to see come to pass. A few minutes later in the interview, following up on the goal she identified, I asked about what that revelation or transformation might look like should it be successfully achieved, and her additional description included equity between people as a critical component of revelation.



Ruby: What would be different as you achieve [this] success? What would be different about you, about the community and the world as you achieve this success that you have defined for yourself?

Looking at other individuals within a community or within a larger world and saying, “Okay, we are individuals where we may not be equal in every part of our lives, [but] there is a sense of what can we do together to achieve a shared purpose.” What I would expect or what I kind of want in terms of this success would be more equitable relations between individuals and within communities and within the representations of those communities. So in government, in the institutions that hold power, in the laws of the land and the importance of those laws.

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Allie's ideas about the extent of that "revelation" were still developing—"I have a lot of ideas about that," she said at the end of her answer—but that has not stopped her from writing in all kinds of genre forms as she works toward the empowerment and transformation she envisions. She had been writing journal entries, posts on social media, and more, including "lesson plans, poetry, letters, press releases for things, [and] public speeches." For her, much of this work was connected to her activism, whether directly or indirectly.

Describing her writing process as "fun experimental exploration," Allie claimed writing as useful for her in several ways at that first interview:

For me, writing is kind of an exploratory or meditative process, but I also use it in different conventions and for different purposes like persuasively or argumentatively or for creative writing purposes, too. It kind of encompasses a lot of what writing is for me specifically and how I use it. [Writing is] good for expressing an intentional purpose. I think it's good for delivering a message, for connecting with others, and that's informational or literary, creative, or otherwise. I think that ultimately, I would say its purpose is to connect and deliver and make a larger conversation. (Allie)

In terms of her own writing, Allie described it this way:

I'm a pretty successful writer. I really subscribe to that growth mindset. In terms of my writing, what that looks like for me is no matter how confident and how strong I am with delivering a purpose in a particular piece of text or something that I'm working on, I always find areas where I can grow and try to expand and just look at it from different angles. I think that's something that's really important to me with my writing. I am very good. I am very confident.

I really, really enjoy it but there is always—I'm always just excited to learn more and do more and try more and it's always a fun experimental exploration when you do different things. (Allie)

Additionally, at that first interview I learned that writing was, for Allie, already very much entwined with her activism. Referencing Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail as an example of writing for social justice that she admired and hoped to emulate, she foregrounded her later statements about how personal writing can be the source of political work when she said:

I find quiet revolutions in books or texts and work all the time. So what can we do to bring that into the larger conversation. What can we do to disrupt the institutions that keep those in the margins, those conversations? (Allie)

She said she wants to engage in those kinds of disruptions with her writing, and had some ideas about how it could take shape:

Writing is going to have to take a lot of different forms. I think it's going to have to take letters to the people that we want to connect with. I think it's going to have to take social media. It does need to be authentic. It needs to be passionate. (Allie)

She also offered a feminist critique of classical approaches to argument at that interview, making the case that traditional persuasive writing is not the most effective way to dismantle traditional institutions:

It needs to appeal to rationality and emotion, but when I think about those traditional conventions that we look at in arguments and persuasive writing, there is still conventions that are arbitrated. They're coming from a source that's flawed or a source that's built into the traditional power structure and the institutions that I think need to be disrupted. (Allie)

Allie articulated a shift from writing that is only personal to writing that has wider audiences, but in her interview at the beginning of the study she also credited that more personal work as generative for her writing as an activist:

All of the writing I do in some way or another has a place in that mission, in that purpose. Maybe just that desire. I think that is the feel for why I write now. If you'd talked to me maybe a few years ago, writing would have been more personal. As much as I was good at using it effectively to respond to things or to advance my purposes, it was definitely more of that meditative exploratory process for me.

It was how I processed my place in the larger scale, and while I still use writing for that, I'm at a point where I can realize that there is another dimension to it.

Right now, [for] personal writing with journaling and letters and things like that, when they are born they might be for a personal small purpose, but they fit into the large scheme. That's why when we look at the past we look at personal documents. We look at those primary sources that were letters, that were journals.

I think writing, in general, is a social process, even the most personal writing. So, yeah, I do think that they all have a really important place in what I want to achieve with my writing. (Allie)

By the date of our last interview, Allie was in her final semester of undergrad—a fulltime student teacher on the brink of obtaining state licensure for teaching high school in North Carolina—and full of stories about her students. We met in my apartment at my dining room table, in part because I was avoiding the heat of an eastern North Carolina spring, and she was enthused about her students and how things were going in her classroom. It was the day after International Women's Day, so she was excited to reiterate her identity as a feminist and an educator. About feminism, which she defined as “someone who believes in equality and human rights,” she said,

It's helped me grow and benefit and take my power and own my power. I think that's why it has shaped my identity so much because if I can spark that or fan that flame in others, then it's everything I want to do. (Allie)

She also reflected on how she became an educator, connecting that to her feminist commitments and her activist work:

For a long time I pushed [against] that role, I did not want to be in that role. In that time in my life, I didn't want to be in that role because I was still trying to push boundaries and realize where I was. For a long time when I was trying to not be an educator, I was actively trying not to be an educator.. Everyone was like, "You need to be an educator. You work great with people. You are so helpful and resourceful." And it's like, no, it's not for me.

In that time, my writing was angry—and I still write angry things of course because I'm an angry person sometimes. Everyone has emotions. But looking back at my writing from that period in my life—a lot of my healing started at the same time of deciding to be an educator, and I don't think that that's a coincidence.

When I learned that I can heal—and I learned that through my education—it's that call to action of: why wouldn't I want to help other people find this love that I found, or if not this love, their love. Because we all have our own different passions that can bring us that healing, that can bring us that peace, that can become so much a part of us that we remember that we are worthy. (Allie)

What genre-fluid strategies does Allie use? Allie uses both of strategies I have identified as genre fluidity. She uses multiple genre formats to support and expand her feminist activism and to imbue her work as an educator with feminist principles. She also combines drafted material from multiple genre forms and sometimes genre-less drafted text into usable forms that may or may not end up following genre conventions. In some cases, Allie creates texts from any and all genre formats and collects writing fragments into those texts, employing that second genre-fluid strategy in the drafting stage. She then employs the first form of genre fluidity when she edits and polishes the drafted work into specific, multiple genre formats for a range of audiences.

She writes lesson plans, emails, reports, scholarly papers, letters, press releases, journal entries, speeches, social media posts, bulleted lists and observations in a commonplace book she hand-illustrates, and poems focused on empowering young women. She writes first—as emotion or inspiration insight comes—and though they may shift from moment to moment, sometimes the genre forms shape themselves quickly. If they do not emerge in a particular genre form, she later frames her “raw” writing into one or more (or even mixed) genre pieces as she deems appropriate.

How and why does she use these strategies? At the final interview, Allie framed her writing work as sometimes creative and sometimes professional or even political. Her writing process, at least at the

drafting stage, generally does not focus on genre forms or conventions at all. Instead, she said “what I know about writing is that I need to get it out of my head before I do anything with it anyway.” In fact, she writes “lots of fragments of things, fragments everywhere. Fragments in notebooks, fragments on Post-it notes on my computer, fragments in [cloud documents], or voice memos.” She laughingly described this process as “weird” and as producing “lots and lots of raw nuggets everywhere just like ore, just piles of ore in my house.” Because for her “writing is kind of an exploratory or meditative process,” Allie takes the raw material she produces and shapes it into genre formats as needed “us[ing] it in different conventions and for different purposes.” This ease—or even need—to write in a non-genred way before adapting those “raw nuggets” into a genre format seems to work well as part of the first genre-fluid strategy, where writing about the things she values and advocates for is consistent although the genre formats may vary.

While at her first interview she said she creates texts that at least eventually—or sometimes—fall within what she later called “those boundaries” of genre, she sees herself as a writer in a broader sense:

Everything I have, I breathe to write. I think that that transcends genre. I think that even if I—let’s say I wrote a novel this year and publish it and it’s a really, really smashing success. I don’t think I would be...“a novelist, this is who I am.” Because that’s just one part of this huge journey I’ve been on with writing, and what it’s meant to me and what it’s done for me and what I’ve done with it. I like to write everything. (Allie)

At the end of the study, Allie also connected her “personal writing with journaling and letters and things like that” to her activism, saying “when they are born, they might be for a personal small purpose, but they fit into the large scheme.” “I think all of the writing I do,” she concluded, “in some way or another has a place in that mission, in that purpose.”

At that final interview, Allie also said she edits her “raw” writing into different genre formats and for different venues and audiences based on what she sees as most effective in a given situation. Over time, she had said in the first interview, she has moved away from social media as a primary communication mode, and she spoke of that shift again at the final interview:

Honestly this is not a space where that will have the impact that—not that there’s only a purpose in speaking if you’re gonna have a desired impact—but it’s almost like throwing it at a brick wall and just hoping it’s going to land nicely and that’s silly to think. (Allie)

Instead, she is branching out into using more creative, academic, and professional writing genre formats to craft messages in contexts where she addresses more specific audiences. This strategy, she says, was gradually developed, in part by trial and error.

When I want to step in with something positive or transformative, [sometimes I realize] this is not a space where that will have the impact. I want to be] where I know I can negotiate for meaning, where I know that I can be there and have that actual connection, I can navigate that fairly well. Not just because I do it every day in the classroom, but also because I've practiced it a lot. (Allie)

What role do Allie's identities play in determining which genre-fluid strategies she uses? Allie is a feminist and an educator, among many identities, and this range gives her multiple places to begin when she is writing. For her, writing is intensely personal, and she wants to incorporate identity and experience in her work rather than try to move away from it. Genres have the potential both to shape and to limit identity, and Allie specifically pushes against those constraints. For example, in one of the group discussions, she asked:

Why is my narrative as a Chicana not interesting? Why is it not accepted in academia? Why are my ideas considered lesser just because I include the "I" in my research? That's something I want to bring to the classroom. The 'I-search' paper. It's what do you want to know more about? How can you do it? What can you show me about what you've learned? And what a powerful way to teach research skills. [heavy sigh] (Allie)



Figure 4 - Allie's identities

Her pushback against limitations—especially genre expectations in academic work—is not just for herself, but is also on behalf of her students. She is working on developing ways to help them expand those boundaries as they learn more about writing.

What role do Allie’s contexts play in determining which genre-fluid strategies she uses? At one writing group meeting, Allie described part of her writing process as thinking about herself almost as a translator, and saying she sometimes uses writing as a form of active listening. This drafting tactic—where she first writes her thoughts as imagined “translations” for an audience and then imagines what an audience’s response or re-translation of the ideas might be gives her an additional opportunity to carefully consider complicated and immediate contexts for any writing she is doing; it connects listening and responding to drafting in narrative form:

The omniscient narrator is that observant person in general. So I feel like when that is the voice in the poetry— I wrote a poem last Sunday about the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, and I kind of had a similar role in that. I was a narrator telling, translating the event into terms for a specific reader or specific recipient.

And then [sigh] I haven’t done a lot of journaling this week, but I think it does connect because it’s that role of listening, being a listener. So, I think that the listening part, as a writer, for me is really important because I take what I hear and I do something with it. I change it and translate it. (Allie)

The poem she mentioned in that group discussion came as a response to yet another mass shooting in the U.S. that made headlines, during a time when a fair amount of vitriol was being expressed toward a caravan of Central American refugees who were headed north toward the Mexico-U.S. border. And it also came in the midst of NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) when she was drafting a new novel:

Right now I don’t know where this novel is going in terms of [literary] genre because I have this inkling that my character is going to be somewhat meta-human, and that— she’s got an intuition that I keep writing about that’s this crackling kind of feeling, or a lot of feeling in her shoulders and between her shoulders. And I’m thinking that ultimately one of her abilities is gonna be to reunite people and connect people to the others that they have lost.

I know [this] sounds so left field. But I think that does have a lot to do with my listening because this was in terms of— I’ve been thinking a lot about the caravan approaching, and I’ve been thinking a lot about the people who have already been separated at the border, what that is in terms of my own history with my dad being an immigrant and having dual citizenship for myself. (Allie)

This specific context was for her both personal and political, and her strategic responses varied from moment to moment: “My genre forms really do play with themes of life, but I also don’t pick one and run with it. I kind of mix them together.”

At the close of Allie’s final interview, after the planned questions and their follow-ups, I asked if she had anything else to say. This is how that interview wrapped up:

Ruby: Is there something I haven’t asked you about that you feel like is important to talk about? About identity, about writing, about how two things overlay with each other? Something that was part of your experience of being in this study that you feel like is important to address in some kind of way?

Allie: One thing I’d like to speak on is that I didn’t realize how important to me these conversations were until we had them. I remember the first one I got super emotional during.

Ruby: You did, talked about anxiety.

Allie: Yeah, and there were a few times during our small group meetings and stuff where I felt that too. All of these ideas of who you are as a writer intersects with who you are as a person, intersects with your emotions and your feelings. So, that for me was really eye-opening, because like I said, I’m this big crybaby emotional being—but I’m okay with that and I haven’t always been okay with that.

I used to think that was a huge weakness, and I’m realizing now that, not only is it not a weakness but it also informs almost everything I do. And that’s actually a strength, and that’s one of my powers. I’m a superhero in that sense sometimes.

Being able to realize that has not only shaped so much of my confidence in this past semester, but also my confidence in interacting with students.... I think that’s been really helpful. I’m getting emotional thinking about it right now. Before this, I did not realize just how much of it is really sacred to me.

DAVE: PUBLIC SERVANT AND PROGRESSIVE

Dave⁵¹ is a straight, white, cis man, of average build, appearing to be in his late forties, and married. He is a federal government employee and an activist who holds a volunteer leadership office in a statewide grassroots political organization. By the time we scheduled our final interview at the end of the study, he was a candidate for political office. He and his wife make “half” what they used to when they lived in a more expensive part of the U.S., but they are “comfortable” enough to be able to regularly contribute to causes

⁵¹ “Dave” is a shortened version of this participant’s name, and is what he uses most of the time. He specifically asked that I use his name rather than a pseudonym.

they care about. He is also an aviation history buff with years of experience in the civil air patrol who holds a B.A. in history and previously completed some graduate coursework in the same field. He heard about the study from a mutual acquaintance and also saw a recruitment flyer posted in the community.

At the beginning of the study, Dave identified his primary writing tasks as all related to his volunteer work in progressive politics. The typical genre forms he identified then were technical and organizational documents, political commentary for social media (primarily Facebook) and he also mentioned a non-fiction book project based on his prior research that he wants to one day return to. Prior to Dave enrolling in this study, I had a nodding acquaintance with him. As a member of the community where I have been living while working on my PhD, where we sometimes attended the same events and engaged with overlapping community groups, he and I had quite a few acquaintances in common. We were barely acquaintances ourselves, however; I knew his face but not his name.

On the day we were scheduled to meet for the first interview, I was early, having come straight to the meeting location from a day on campus. When the time arranged for the interview had passed, I texted him to re-confirm we were meeting that evening. After having arrived early himself, Dave had waited outside a different entrance to the building—and had waited, believing I was not there for our meeting. Dressed in khakis and a neat shirt (but not for work, where he wears a uniform), he came across as quiet and both tense and intense. At first, I thought perhaps the mix-up about building entrances might have contributed to his demeanor, but I came to understand that this—along with his very terse conversational style and occasional deadpan delivery of a one-liner—is very characteristic of Dave.

When asked to “define or describe” himself at the beginning of that interview, Dave spoke first about his community volunteerism. “I’ve been volunteering for the better good for a really long time,” he told me, and then he ran through a list of volunteer experiences, tracing a path from his youth in the Civil Air Patrol, through several careers in public safety, to his current work in political organizing. My initial interview questions asked about identity in general rather than for specific demographic information, so he moved immediately to the components of his identity that he sees as most relevant when answering the question. I, as a researcher whose life experiences have been shaped primarily by embodied and socially constructed

identities (and aware that everyone who appears to be a cis-het white man of a certain age may not be exactly that), pressed him for more information. After my brief and awkward attempt to get him to speak about those components of his identity, he fell back on describing his family, his career trajectory, and then his social class:

Ruby: So what about a description of your social location?

Dave: Social location. I'm sure that means something in your grad school.

Ruby: Yeah, so gender, race, class, those kinds of things. A lot of people say identity. That's the kind of stuff they mean. So I'm asking about that as well.

Dave: Cis? [pause] I'm gonna get all the words wrong.

Ruby: No, I think that's the right word.

Dave: Okay. All right. I've been married for 28 years. I have two kids. I have a job where I am not taxed at all. And— I make way less than I used to.

This led directly back into his positioning himself as an activist who works a day job that lets him volunteer and live out his values. “For years I was trading everything for money,” he said, then named a figure that—in eastern North Carolina at least, would put a household of four well in the upper middle class:

But it really was trading all of me. I got shingles, I slept in my office when I needed to and just couldn't do it. Hence the clinical depression. And so now I make about half that and so does my wife. So we're okay. That means if somebody needs \$27.00 a month⁵², they get it. I contribute to a lot of causes. I'm still working around the clock, but now it's for me. (Dave)

While he did not address his whiteness⁵³, Dave's self-description—as a middle-class person with a mental health diagnosis and a chronic health condition—expanded as he shared some less-visible components of his identity. He eventually also described himself as wonky and having “political wokeness,” followed immediately by “note [the] air quotes”; but Dave returned often to his identity as a volunteer for (mostly political) causes he cares about. While his more obvious embodied identities place him in centered social locations—to the point where being constantly required to think about his gender and race and sexuality is

⁵² This is a reference to campaign contributions for a national political candidate.

⁵³ Scholarship on how any unstated racial phenotype is assumed to be white (Ratcliff, 2007) and U.S citizenship is implicitly coded as white (Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliff, 2005; Morrison, 2013) is relevant here. See Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe's (2017) edited collection for several essays and narratives related to the invisibility of whiteness in public spaces.

not a daily concern—he noted identities of class and health status that are significant to him as potentially marginalizing.

In terms of his writing, Dave first described his level of success in writing as “not very.” This description turned out to be related specifically to his incomplete master’s thesis rather than a description of his writing overall. When pressed for a more detailed answer, he did mention in that first interview that “persuasive writing and explanatory writing” were some writing genre formats that he is “pretty good” at. He described that work this way:

I find myself doing things that are uncharacteristic as far as researching things like tax policy and [pause] arguing for universal healthcare and arguing for progressive tax, explaining what marginal tax rates are. A lot of policy wonk stuff. (Dave)

With plans to one day use his graduate research in history as the basis for a nonfiction book, Dave definitely identified himself as a writer. He also, however, positioned himself as someone who does not necessarily need to be published for writing to be worthwhile. He, after thinking his way through these ideas as we spoke, eventually connected success to being persuasive and providing information rather than to graduating or being published:

Historical stuff is like therapy for me. It’s my respite. I would like people to be persuaded, too [pause] regarding the policies. I’d like for the policies to make sense and if they don’t make sense, then I’d like them to give me feedback and correct.

As far as the respite writing, I want to be complete. I want to be thorough. I want to provide a reference for others that are interested in the future.

[The eventual goal is] actually having a manuscript, whether or not it’s published. Because I can get it to the people that would be interested in that, get it to museums and archives that are appropriate. Even if it doesn’t publish. (Dave)

At our initial interview, Dave was very clear about the goals he hopes to achieve through his writing, wanting to use “the policy stuff” to persuade audiences. The progressive goals he outlined that day were societal changes related primarily to economic justice, what Dave is always working toward, but they are not necessarily something he believes he will ever see. Even in light of his surety that the goal is not fully within reach, I asked him how reaching that vision might impact him:

Dave: I don’t see success as necessarily attainable, but we can get closer to it.

Ruby: Yeah. Well, if you wanna get close to it, knowing what it looks like is pretty important. So, yeah. You've laid out quite a vision there.

Dave: Yeah, it haunts me.

Ruby: So I guess my last official question is what would be different about yourself, about the community, about the world, if you achieve success? And I think you already answered a lot of that. You definitely talked about what the world would be like. How would you be different?

Dave: I wouldn't have to mess with this stuff. I could just enjoy it like everybody else.

Ruby: Okay.

Dave: You know, at this point, the 40 hours of work is rest compared to what I do everywhere else. I would like to concentrate more on the solution. I would like to come up with better solutions. I would like to figure out how to implement them, how to get legislators elected that are even remotely interested in getting fewer people from sleeping under bridges.

In every subsequent conversation, writing group meeting, and his final interview, Dave's singular focus on these goals shone through. Just weeks before our final interview, Dave's son passed away, and the deep grief that he was clearly experiencing was paired with his focus on making the world a better place for as many people as possible.

What genre-fluid strategies does Dave use? Dave uses one form of genre fluidity in his writing as an activist. Regardless of genre format, he focuses on progressive policy reform and on public service—using multiple single-genre texts for a single purpose to write in a genre-fluid way. This writing work is centered on his progressive commitments, including advocating for policy change, informing voters about policy and potential reforms, and even campaigning for a position as a policymaker. Likewise, he uses writing to both engage in public service and encourage others to do so. Dave's primary focus on progressive public service is evident in his social media posts, policy briefs, organizational documents and internal communication, campaign speeches, political articles.

In the case of his public-facing writing, Dave's process often leaned toward multimodal work. In a writing group meeting where the conversation was focused on using technological tools and writing for social media, Dave discussed when he is most likely to use visual elements in writing for online audiences:

If it's something besides a [basic text] document then I need to illustrate it. I need to have other things accompanying it. I feel burdened to put some sort of an illustration, the thematic thing [to] come along and grab your attention, because otherwise my gray space is just the same as everybody else's gray space.

And to put together an article with illustrations—something compelling. When I write, I want the image to complement. And when I have an image, I want the writing to complement the image.
(Dave)

How and why does he use these strategies? Dave talked about his usual writing process with characteristic humor, and in his concluding interview he described it this way:

What usually happens is I find some writing must be done, I avoid it as long as possible, and I write from the heart (proper citation when appropriate)⁵⁴. Then I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and then send it out to the readers. (Dave)

In addition to beginning from his heart, Dave—like Allie—also does not begin with genre conventions. “Not in the initial drafting,” he said in that final interview, “I think [at that point that] I think more about the audience.” He does usually have an idea of what genre form the text will eventually take, he said, but he focuses first on audience and content, thinking about specific genre conventions later, at the editing stage of his process.

In our last interview, Dave said he “like[s] to think [he is] incorporating new ideas and strategies” when he writes, but then backed away from that almost-claim. “I don’t honestly know. I’m not sure what strategy I’m pursuing,” he said. After a bit of thought, however, he eventually said he focused on audiences, settings, and goals.

His focus on progressive public service is so central to everything Dave writes that he even incorporated a discussion of it into his son’s eulogy; because a love of public service was something they shared, it was a natural connection. Having the opportunity to talk about their shared public service commitments helped him get through the memorial service, he said during our final interview, and it became one of the primary themes highlighted in that event. Early in that interview, I had asked Dave about his view of his writing:

Ruby: When we began the study, you said this about yourself as a writer: “Not very [successful].” “As far as persuasive writing and explanatory writing, I think I do pretty good.” Is this still an accurate description?

⁵⁴ These parentheticals are Dave’s rather than a transcriptionist’s, because our last interview was conducted in the form of a live cloud-based chat, where he was typing his answers rather than speaking them. Despite that computer mediation, his sense of humor still shined—and, perhaps, even came through more clearly because he could indicate tone in a way that is not always reflected in a basic transcript.

Dave: I hope so, I try to be thoughtful and persuasive. That's the point, usually. Sometimes I write just to express myself, to enjoy the beauty of the words, the stream of consciousness. Not often. Maybe not often enough. Maybe I could be more persuasive if I let that in a little more.

When discussing his work on putting together “the speech for [his] son’s remembrance,” Dave said, “It was a strange process. Followed the form: delayed writing, a stream of consciousness, but I presented as that stream had originally flowed.” He fell back on much of his usual pattern for writing, which he described as being procrastination first, then writing without thinking much about genre format. But in this case, he did not then edit the draft in an attempt to fit the text into a specific set of genre conventions. “It just came out,” he said, and he left it that way. He ended up speaking quite a bit about his son’s work with search and rescue⁵⁵ teams, a form of volunteer public service that he and his son were both involved in.

During the course of this project, Dave engaged with other new forms of writing to advance his progressive goals. By the time we conducted the last interview, he had made the decision to run for office himself rather than just supporting the campaigns of others. As a political candidate, he said in that last interview that he found himself writing even more political content than before, and in more wide-ranging multiple genre formats for public audiences. When asked how he was doing with those new genres forms in our final interview, Dave responded with his usual dry humor: “As to writing well, it’s like pornography, I know it when I see it.”

The proliferating number of genre forms Dave was using continued to be in service of what he viewed as a more economically just society. His genre-fluid use of multiple distinct genre forms has a single goal:

I’m just interested in my society and I’m trying to do the right thing. I’m willing to sacrifice for the greater good. These were the things I was taught to do and be. I have a chance to improve society, I value that. I revel in that, and I hope I can accomplish it. (Dave)

What role do Dave’s identities play in determining which genre-fluid strategies he uses?

Though his reserved and analytical temperament likely also plays a role, Dave’s identities of public servant and progressive directly influence the genre-fluid strategy he uses when writing.

⁵⁵ Search and rescue teams, including many specially-trained volunteers, focus on situations where people are in extreme or immediate danger due to stranding in remote or unsafe locations, natural disasters, and more. They find and rescue people, of course, but also often provide on-site and en-route emergency services to the people being rescued.

Dave, who has long embraced these identities, deliberately chooses to work in genre formats that focus on information-based persuasion because he sees progressive policies as beneficial to the public he serves. “That fundamental desire to help people has been there. That’s part of the progressive identity,” he told me during our last interview. Another aspect of his identity, which he did not mention until the final interview, also has impacted his commitments to policy change:

When I was disabled in 1998, I realized how cruel things really were: humiliation and effectively begging to subsist. That’s when I knew that something policy-related was required to keep us from chaos. So here I am. I’d rather someone come along and do it for me. They haven’t done so. So if not me, who? If not now, when? (Dave)

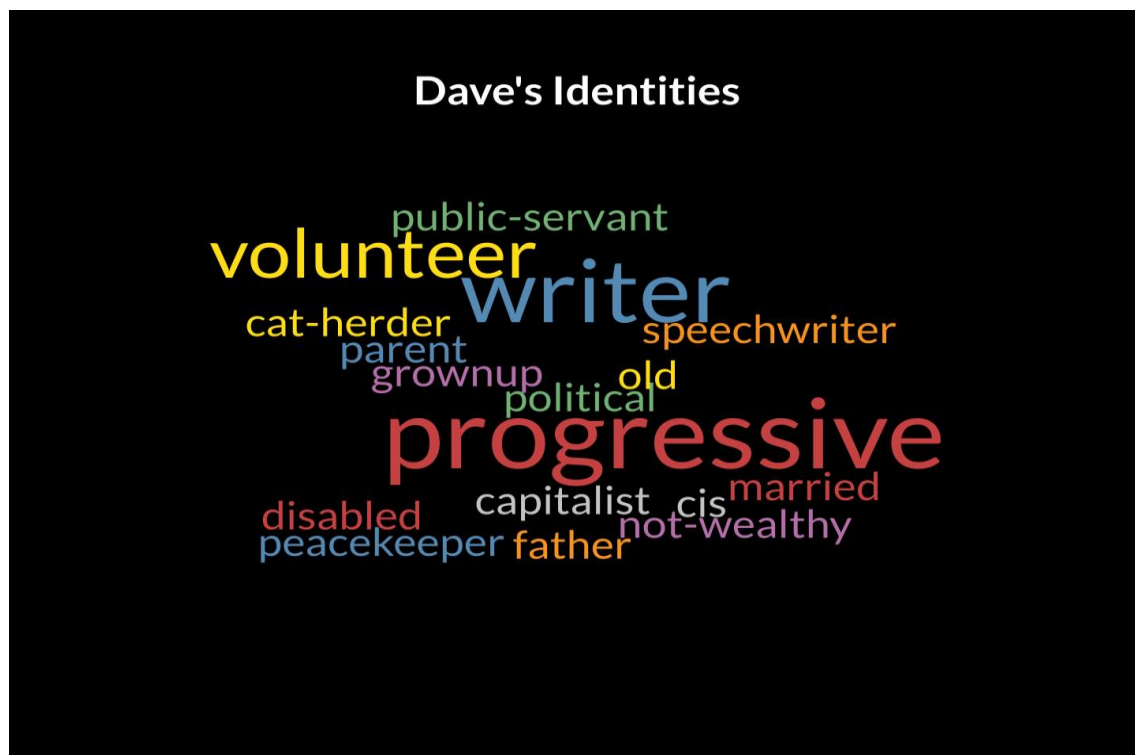


Figure 5 - Dave's identities

As a progressive who puts public service first, he said he views writing as “a tool to help change the world”—and since that is what he most wants to do, he tries to focus on strategies that help him get closer to that kind of service with his writing, saying in our last interview, “if I can communicate effectively, maybe it’ll make a difference.”

Living out his closely-connected identities—public servant and progressive—is Dave’s way of working toward the future he imagines. In that brighter future that he works to one day bring to pass, he described in the first interview the world he envisions:

The world has changed. We’re not this way to one another. We’re kinder. People don’t sleep under bridges unless they really, really want to. People aren’t hungry. People aren’t trying to decide between medication and food. The next genius isn’t stocking shelves at [a big-box retailer]. They’re getting the education they need. They help the country. Geniuses are nurtured and they help the country and we help them. I don’t see this success as necessarily attainable, but we can get closer to it. (Dave)

Dave aligns his writing and his activism—focused on that not-quite-attainable changing the world that he is trying to get closer to—with the work he did as a former EMT and his stints as a disaster volunteer. “How is this effectively different from helping find a lost person, jump-starting someone’s car, or applying pressure to a wound?” he asked in our closing interview, continuing with a simple statement that sums up his worldview quite well: “There is someone who needs help, and I want to help.”

What role do Dave’s contexts play in determining which genre-fluid strategies he uses? Dave uses the first of two genre-fluid strategies—the multiple-forms central-purpose strategy—in his writing as an activist. This primary purpose is inextricably linked to the political, social, and economic contexts where he finds himself, because it is the hope of changing these very contexts that drives him:

The majority of people, all over the world, are having a tough time just getting by. A small minority are setting up the system and it works well for them. I’d like to do what I can to affect that. I’m not particularly radical on that point, but I see that the current system works to disadvantage the majority to enrich the few. (Dave)

He sees context as mostly political, or at least directly connected to how political systems impact individuals and communities, so context for him is also a major factor in the strategies he employs to be an effective communicator. His purpose is almost always persuasive, and his audience is almost always the voting public, so Dave selects multiple genre formats that can be effective for those goals and that audience.

Here is how Dave, in our final interview, described the connections between the multiple persuasive and informational genre forms he makes use of and the work he is trying to do:

In order to change policy you need to convince others that it’s a good idea to do so. I try to incorporate [a] conversational tone...to present logical and compelling arguments to change opinion. I need to present reasons that are so persuasive that not only will they agree with me, they’ll actually go to the effort to vote. It’s forced a whole new set of issues for me to consider, and problems to solve. It’s invigorating and daunting. (Dave)

“We’re all in this together,” he also said. “We’re here for such a short time, we should try to make things a little easier for each other whenever we have the opportunity.” This commitment to service is fundamental to who he is: “I’m just interested in my society and I’m trying to do the right thing. I’m willing to sacrifice for the greater good. These were the things I was taught to do and be.”

After previously claiming he did not consciously use writing strategies at all, Dave then went on to clearly state that contexts—which he called “specific settings”—shape the strategies he uses when he writes. At our last interview, Dave describe how his shifting contexts have likewise prompted changes in his writing and activism:

The [U.S.] federal government in its present form is essentially discarding the improvements we’ve made as a country over the last fifty years. The state [of North Carolina], while on a more limited basis, has been attempting that for the last nine years. I see that our movement has made a difference. That there is still hope.

The challenges are enormous and the stakes are high—in my perspective, it is the future of the country and the world at stake. My role in politics has changed as I find myself deeply involved in statewide issues. My decision to run [for elected office] means that motivating and persuading are at the forefront of my writing priorities.

My son’s death changed everything. One of my reasons for doing all the above is gone, but I can’t stop. His choice to end his life was not to punish anyone, it was to end his pain. I need to persist so others know that alternatives to suffering are possible. (Dave)

J: LIBRARIAN-IN-TRAINING AND ACADEMIC

J⁵⁶ is a bisexual white woman, forty-ish, tall and thin, who frequently describes herself as a “middle-aged millennial.” She is a graduate student in library sciences at East Carolina University, where she previously earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English. She volunteers with the LGBTQ Resource Office at East Carolina University, and is working on a nonfiction book project.

Prior to enrolling in the study, I did not know J at all. While the community of Greenville and the campus community are very small in some ways, it seems they are large in others. I had volunteered a bit on behalf of the LGBTQ Resource Office on campus—but am hardly ever actually in the office—so it seems as

⁵⁶ “J” is a pseudonym. This participant and I have agreed that using one of her initials is an appropriate way to identify her within all publications and presentations related to this project.

though we would have met at some point. (Perhaps this speaks to how rare it is for graduate students in different programs to interact at all?) She saw a notice about the study in the Resource Office and emailed me with questions about participation.

We met in an office on campus for our first interview. J came to her first interview wearing a thickly-woven knit cap and casual clothes underneath a zippered jacket. She sometimes walked to or from the writing group meetings, or asked for a ride after meetings that she walked to. When offered a ride, she always asked to be dropped off at a nearby public library branch rather than a home address.

J mostly described her identity based on her academic and professional roles rather than any visible embodied identities or social location. She repeatedly referenced her previous degree programs and her work in academic spaces, from her undergraduate experiences (more than two decades prior) and her previous employment at the nearby Pitt Community College. This was most clear from her response to one of my scripted questions at the first interview, which was “how do you define, or describe, or identify yourself?” J’s answer to this question included discussing a published study she had recently read, reflecting at length about the day she received her acceptance letter for the library science master’s program, and providing a list of descriptions she said she often “share[s] with so many students” about how things have changed since she was an undergrad on the same campus.

Gradually, tentatively, at the end of that first-interview discussion about how things have changed since her first experience on the campus, J began to approach the issue of sexuality:

This campus today is not the campus that I walked onto 25 years ago. It’s a lot more diverse. It’s definitely a lot bigger, but it’s a lot more diverse. It’s a lot more welcoming. It’s a lot more inclusive. And I think it’s a lot safer in terms of giving students that sense of security that no matter who they, or what they are, they’re going to be accepted, they’re going to be protected, they have advocacy, they have support networks, such as the LGBTQ office. I think of that as a classic example of an office that not only provides information and education, but there’s that sense of advocacy, and there’s that safe space for students to go. (J)

This statement positioned queer students as “they” rather than “we.” It nodded to her activism as a volunteer mentor on campus, working with queer undergraduates, and may have been done as way to differentiate between current undergrads and those of us whose undergrad experiences were in previous decades—or even

simply to distinguish undergrads from graduate students—but this careful phrasing also struck me as significant in a different way⁵⁷.

As discussed previously, my desire for demonstrating the project included participants with multiple marginalized identities was a bit at odds with my plan to not include specific demographic questions—so that participants could speak to the identities that they found salient for their activism and their identities as writers. In this moment, when J responded to a question about her identity by talking about the queer identities of undergrads she worked with, I wanted to know how she identified—so I followed up on the ‘describe your identity’ question in a less-than-elegant⁵⁸ way:

Ruby: I hear you saying that you identify as a scholar.

J: Mm-hmm.

Ruby: And that you identify as a member of the campus community here at ECU.

J: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Ruby: But in terms of cultural identity, gender identity, age, sexuality, all those kinds of things, I’m really interested in how those things impact the way that people write. So, in any way that you’re comfortable describing yourself—

J: Sure, okay.

Ruby: —in those kinds of terms, I’d like to hear that too.

After this rephrasing of the question J began to answer the question again, this time claiming an identity as a “mid-lennial” (her term for “a middle-aged millennial”) and Instagram user, as having an affinity with Gen Y, and as a social progressive. This time, her response was twice the length of her first answer, and she eventually returned to the topic of inclusivity on campus—yet still without directly identifying her own sexual orientation.

⁵⁷ In that moment, I interpreted this framing as a reluctance to discuss her identity in terms of sexuality. As a graduate student—sitting across from me, someone who is an out queer-identified scholar also working on a graduate degree—J did not include either of us in the “they” who now have a safer, more inclusive campus. And while J did not know me prior to enrolling in the study, we had exchanged several emails where a Safe Zone logo featured prominently in my email signature; we were also meeting in my office, which features several rainbow-themed stickers prominently displayed, and by the date of the interview she knew we were both volunteers at the LGBTQ Resource Center on campus. This was a time when I failed to appropriately decenter myself in the research process.

⁵⁸ In retrospect, I could have simply asked, “Do you personally identify as queer or as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?” But, as with racial identity in my initial interview with Dave, I instead took a roundabout (and not particularly successful) path toward finding an answer to a question.

In the following excerpt, which picks up near the end of her second answer in that initial interview, J shifted toward including me in the “you guys” of queer students. (This change could have been a second-person generality, but in that moment, I understood her to be referring to me as an individual⁵⁹.) Eventually, she did include herself in the “we” who have resources available on campus—yet she still did not specifically state her sexual orientation.

J: A lot of the ideas that I had way-back-when have changed, and in effect, have helped to transform me. And one of the things that I’ve shared with so many students is that I look at this campus now, it’s transformed, it’s so different from what I knew, and for the most part, I love it! I love the fact that you guys have a campus where you feel safe, and you feel like you can express yourself. And you feel like you can find advocacy, and you can find all these avenues of support. And you can get educated, and you get enlightened.

So, you don’t have to carry a lot of the ideas that people in my generation and on back had. I’ll just give you this as an illustration: I’ve shared with students that several of the offices and departments that we have on campus did not exist when I was a student. We did not have the LGBT office.

Ruby: Right.

J: We did not have SAGA, which is the Sexuality and Gender Alliance. Gosh, there was another one I was thinking of. [pause] Oh, WGO, Women and Gender—these offices did not exist, and I don’t think they really could’ve existed. Because ECU was not enlightened enough to support the ideas that these departments support; much less being behind the idea of creating an office that allows for self-expression, and allows students to have a safe place, and allows students to be accepted and celebrated for who they are, as well as what they are. That’s one of the differences I’ve noticed.

I’m actually very pleased, and I’m very relieved by the fact that they’re allowed to have the kinda college experience that I definitely could not have had back then. And I—

Ruby: But you’re having now.

J: —And I’m having now. So, one of the things—one of the words that I’ve shared with students is that: here I am a fortunate witness. I’m not only here—it’s not just a matter of me being on the outside looking in, and seeing what you have now; here I am experiencing it right along with you, and it’s wonderful!

When I asked the next question, J referred to a recent example of a time when writing connected with her identity by discussing her story of coming out as bisexual⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ And, clearly, I was continuing to fail at decentering myself in this part of the interview. It is not the part of my work that I am particularly proud of, but I recognize in hindsight that this over-investment was an extensive side-tracking from the core of my work. I have since learned about a great model for collecting quantitative identity-based demographic information that minimizes restrictions placed on participants and respondents (Patterson, 2019), so I have a better idea about how to address this in future projects.

⁶⁰ At that point, the overly-invested former-journalist in me wanted to (inappropriately) congratulate myself for persistence—or something—but I should not have. The interview skills that served me well as an investigative reporter and later as a features profile writer are not always useful now; I am working on a different skill set as a researcher, and will continue to do so in an effort to improve.

Ruby: So, what role, if any, does writing play in the way you define yourself, or identify or describe yourself?

J: Okay, I'll give you this as an illustration, and this is one of those events that 25 years ago if someone had told me, "You are gonna participate in Coming Out Day, and you're gonna share with a room full of strangers how you came to accept that you are bisexual." Twenty-five years ago, there was actually [only] one person on campus who knew.

As part of that coming out story, J revealed that she had only recently begun to fully address her sexual identity and publicly claim her sexual orientation⁶¹. "I've finally gotten to the point of acceptance in the last couple of years," she said. At that point I finally understood that openly claiming a queer identity is relatively new territory for her. I also came to realize at some point during the study that J is voluble in general; she told stories and used extended metaphors as a way to make points or illustrate an idea⁶², which, as I should have noticed much sooner, was characteristic for J as a former English major.

In that first interview, J initially defined writing by what she believes it can do:

Writing is a form of self-expression. It's a way to help define who you are, and the direction that you're going in life in terms of your advancements, and successes, and even your failures. Because sometimes failures can be incredibly empowering because they can teach you a lot about yourself.

And one of the other wonderful purposes that writing serves in terms of growth is that in the process of writing it down, it can actually help to give you insights that you may not have had otherwise. So, I find writing incredibly empowering; I find it incredibly cathartic. So, empowering, enlightening, cathartic, [pause] a form of self-expression. (J)

As the following conversation in the same interview revealed, however, J's conception of what writing *is* aligns with the most common of definitions: achieving correctness in grammar and punctuation. She fell back on her identity as an academic to frame her definition, and critiqued both high school and undergraduate programs by painting them as inadequate in terms of grammar instruction:

J: I've definitely gotten a lot more successful as a writer over the years. And I think that for me, with regards to some of those grammatical and punctuation issues that I carried with me throughout public school, because for whatever reason, grammar was not really emphasized. Actually, I can think back to my high school years, in four years, I wrote two papers: I wrote one paper in 10th grade, and one paper in the 12th grade, and that was it; so, I mean, so practically no writing.

There was very little in the way of instruction towards the grammar, and actually—interestingly enough, in working towards that BA, and this is something that I've wondered about on-and-off over

⁶¹ Not only did I stray from decentering the researcher (me), but also I failed to honor some tenets of queer community, namely, respecting the right of others to come out (including continually coming out) in their own timing and their own terms, and to tell their coming out stories their own way.

⁶² The phrase my grandparents used for this, when they referred to my tendency to do the same, was "quite a talker." And I am.

the years, is that—I don’t know if this is true for the BA in English now—but back when I was here working on my undergraduate degree, we were required to take only one grammar course. I’ll never forget it, it was English 2710—and I ended up getting a B in the course.

I did learn a lot in the course, but there were some issues that I, for whatever reason, continue to struggle with. But ironically, interestingly, and wonderfully enough, all of those issues were taken care of once I went into teaching in earnest. So, it was the process of reiterating those finer points of grammar, spelling, and punctuation that actually helped me to get past them, and in the process, improving the quality of my work.

Ruby: So in part, you would say that your definition of writing includes that kinda mechanical stuff—

J: Oh, yeah.

Ruby: —the grammar or the punctuation.

J: As self-improvements, self-editing.

At our first interview, the primary kinds of writing J said she engaged in are research-based academic papers (as is typical for a graduate student), but she said she also regularly journals and had a book project—based on the 1974 Amityville, New York murders—currently in progress. She credited journaling with providing personal insights, and spoke extensively about her experiences with applying to conferences. She also discussed her “novelography” book project at length, but did not directly answer further questions about an activist identity or about her vision for how her activism might bring about positive change.

The closest J came to answering questions about what kind of activism was important to her during our first interview⁶³ was when she stated her goal of presenting a new perspective on what happened in Amityville. Her book, she said, makes the argument that the so-called haunting popularized in pop culture representations of Amityville has been deliberately framed to be monetized, rather than as “emotional hauntings.” This is a message, she said she specifically wants to get “out there.” By the end of the study, as I will discuss in the next chapter, she more clearly identified with activism.

What genre-fluid strategies does J use? Based on the two-part definition I had developed to use for this project, J is the one participant who did not use genre-fluid strategies. For this reason, the answers

⁶³ It was clear to me at the first interview that J identified more as a writer than as an activist, but she did talk about her volunteering and mentoring work with the LGBTQ Resource Center on campus, and about how she hoped to resist commercial narratives as well as traditional gender expectations. Even though she effectively ignored my questions about activism and the changes she hopes to bring about through activist work, I decided to keep her in the study. As the rest of this case study—and my look at the writing group’s impact in Chapter 6—shows, the results of this decision were mixed.

that follow in the rest of this case study are a bit tangential to the research questions. However, because this is an exploratory study rather than a definitive one, I believe the discussion of J's almost-but-not and not-quite-yet genre fluidity are important disidentifications worthy of examining.

Though she writes in multiple genres, they are not all concerned with a singular purpose. J writes in several genres specific to her work with academic libraries and her role as a graduate student. Conference presentations, seminar papers, professional blogs, database entries, and—by the end of the study, the beginning of a journal article draft—all are writing she does as part of those critical identities. In addition, she has written short essays and talks, is writing her personal “chronicles” about her second journey into academia, has “journalled on-and-off for years,” writes blank verse poetry and creative nonfiction, and is working on a novel.

While she writes in fairly traditional genre forms, J's resistance to conventions is most present in her work within literary genres. In our first conversation, she had called her novel-in-progress a “fictionalized-version-of-a-true-story sort of thing” and “a biography in the sense that it's largely based on truth, but there's also a lot of fiction put in there; so it's a mixture of the two.” Over the course of the study, J began to expand her conception of the work in progress. While still using novel as one term for the manuscript she has been working on for several years, by the last interview she had moved to understanding the text as “post-gender fiction” that she further labeled as “an example of a transformational genre.” It is transformational, she said in her final interview, because “it can challenge and enlighten readers and writers' perspectives about gender identity and sexual orientation.”

How and why does she use these strategies? Even though her work does not align with genre fluidity as I have defined it, J is queering her ostensibly genred text to be more expansive than she says that particular literary genre form usually is⁶⁴. Specifically, in our last interview, J identified the period of the study as at least partially coinciding with this shift in her project:

In the past year, my novel has become more gender fluid. It began by including post gender names like Taylor, Morgan, and Jordan, and not specifying the gender of these characters. It progressed to

⁶⁴ And as literature is much more her area of expertise than mine, I leave that what-actually-counts-as-a-novel-genre-format conversation to her.

changing the names of characters to post gender names, and removing pronouns that would indicate gender.

Before I became more aware of the impacts of gender identity, I never considered the impact that not including details such as gender/sex could have on readers. As I revised this novel, I've realized that not including pronouns and giving characters non-gender specific names gives readers the opportunity to participate more fully in the development of the narrative. (J)

Engaging in some genre-busting work by writing a “post-gender” novel, J’s primary strategy for that project centers on reframing what a novel can be, according to what she discussed in her final interview:

Not having pronouns attached to the characters and giving those characters post gender names sets readers free to imagine characters as they desire, need, and want. They can “assign” a character a gender and/or sex (or not). Readers can “assign” a character a sexual orientation (or not). Because of this, readers are left freer to identify and relate with characters in whatever manner that they want, need, and desire. (J)

J’s genre-expansive writing strategies are primarily employed within the literary genre form, as she works on a novel that moves in experimental directions, so her work does not meet the definition of genre fluidity as outlined at the beginning of this project. Overall, though she writes in many genre formats, they are not all focused on the same general topic or purpose. To some extent, she also employs multiple conventional genre formats when writing about her “2.0” experiences as a student on the same, but much changed, campus where she studied for her undergraduate degree. Her writing is in multiple genre formats, but is not genre-fluid.

What role do J’s identities play in determining which genre-fluid strategies she uses?

Although not genre-fluid, J’s identity is central to the writing that she does. For example, one new genre format she used during the course of the study was a book purchase request and accompanying rationale, and her success with her very first attempt at this genre form buoyed her sense of identity as a librarian. Choosing the fairly mundane genre format was the right one for her purpose in that moment, and based on what she told me during her closing interview, it reinforced her identity quite powerfully:

I submitted the form, not really expecting my rationale for purchasing the book to be persuasive enough—after all, I’m not a “real” staff member, I’m “just” a [grad-]student-employee. Last month, I received a notice that the book had been purchased, and because it had just arrived, I was the first patron to check it out. Having the book alone was quite fulfilling. Being the first patron to have access to it was quite fulfilling.

That I was responsible for bringing this book into [the library’s] collection, my belief about the book’s value had been taken seriously by librarians, and other patrons will be able to read this book

because I decided to take that opportunity, has heightened that fulfillment to stratospheric heights.
(J)

This identity as a librarian, as J made clear from the very first interview, is a big part of who she is. “I got drawn into this library community,” she told me during her first interview, and identifying with that community came quickly: “I learned a lot about library life, about the role that librarians play on campus, and the important role they can have in the lives of students and faculty members, and staff. I fell in love with library work.”

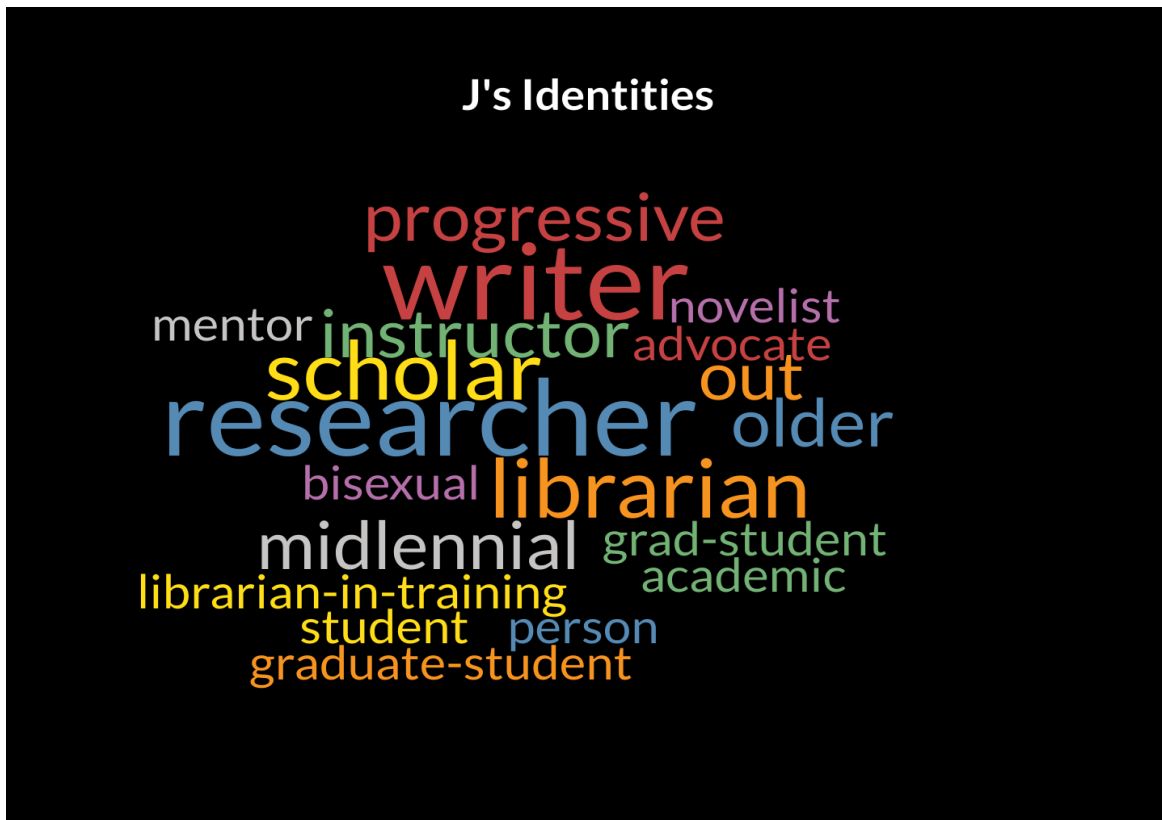


Figure 6 - J's identities

Another example of J making genre choices based on identity is the investment she makes with her time on social media. As she spends most of her time on a college campus, that context also seems to make a difference. She told me in our first interview that she identified as a “midlennial,” or “middle-aged millennial,” and she returned to that clearly-central identification in our last interview:

I’ve developed a greater awareness of my identity in terms of which generation I...identify with. Over the years, I’ve grown increasingly aware, and therefore, ill at ease, with how much I don’t “fit in” as a member of Generation X—I’m part of this generation from a chronological standpoint only. I’ve

become more aware of how much I “fit in” with Generation Y in terms of what I believe in and care about. The students...[and] the young people I’ve befriended as a nontraditional student, helped me to realize how much more I can relate to and identify with their life experiences and attendant values. In fact, for all practical purposes, I am a Gen Y. (J)

Both her choice of platform—Instagram⁶⁵ instead of other social media platforms used more by her chronological age group—and the user name she has chosen, @midlennial⁶⁶, are a reflection of her identifying with Gen Y (that is, millennials) more than with her age-mates in Gen X. J also said in the closing interview that spending so much time with undergrads⁶⁷ has helped her realize just how much she has aligned with what she says their values are: “inclusivity, sustainability, leadership, and collaboration.”

By the conclusion of this research project, J’s continued alignment with this identity led to her becoming more interested in environmental issues, and she then took on the library task of indexing periodicals that included content about endangered species in North Carolina. This led, in turn, to her joining both a campus organization and a regional organization which share the goal of advocacy and education related to the fragility of sea turtle nests. Though she seemed to balk a bit at an activist identity at the end of the study, by the end of the project this clearly was not an issue.

What role do J’s contexts play in determining which genre-fluid strategies she uses? As noted previously, J does not use the strategies I had identified as genre-fluid. However, the contexts within which she has placed herself are quite important to the writing projects she chooses to pursue. J’s writing is often connected to her seeking community in academic spaces, especially in professional library circles. Her writing in those contexts falls within a genre set associated with library science, or is for formal academic projects. The other writing she does is mostly connected to her second-time-around experiences as a student, and much of this work has been about chronicling the experience in some way: journaling, memoir, and social

⁶⁵ According to the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019), currently members of Gen X are ages 40-55, and millennials, who are sometimes referred to as Gen Y, are ages 24-39. Instagram use in the U.S. does skew younger: from 67 percent of 18-29 year olds and 47 percent of 30-49 year olds to 23 percent of 50-64 year olds (Pew Research Center, n.d.). For the site’s users, content creation, through the posting of Instagram Stories is much more common for users under 40; but consuming content created by others users varies little across age ranges (Israfilzade & Babayev, 2020).

⁶⁶ Though otherwise anonymous in this study, J provided written permission to include her handle as part of this discussion about her use of social media with a “middle-aged millennial” identity—as “a tribute to the positive impact that many ECU students from Gen Y have had in [her] life, professionally and personally” (personal communication, 2020).

⁶⁷ As previously noted, millennials are no longer of the ‘traditional’ age for college undergrads, but likely J is using the term in a slightly more general way—as so many do—to refer to young adults in general.

media posts. Her work on a novel predates her career shift into library science, but the research she did early in that project seems to have, at least in part, prompted the interest in library work.

She sees her librarianship and the mentoring of undergrads as on a continuum that also includes her experimental novel, as she believes they all have the potential to lead to enlightenment. “Enlightenment,” she said at the first interview, is about “showing you that there is another way to view this topic. That you don’t have to subscribe to the perspective that’s been fed to you all these years, and one that’s been popular.”

Working in an academic library, for her, is obviously as much a calling as it is a career.

And her involvement in those professional spaces has allowed her to make a difference at work—and, she told me in the last interview, even inspired her toward activism. At the library, she said she has been “contributing [information about] historically underrepresented groups such as women to [the] NC Collection periodical database,” engaging in activities to “assure women’s voices—represented through their perspectives and experiences—are recognized.” This work further inspired her to expand her on-campus involvement, and she joined a campus-wide project “focused on education and advocacy with the goal of ending sexual violence, harassment, and bullying” (Pledge Purple, 2019), and to volunteer for a Take Back the Night event to rally against sexual assault.

Her increased engagement with activism—in placing herself even more into contexts where she spends time with the young activist students whose values she shares—has expanded the kinds of writing she does, and it has also shifted the way she now approaches her literary writing. For example, her novel project was already in the works when the study began, with an original goal of offering her readers “freedom;” at our last interview, she said she is now much more ambitious and wants to “challenge and enlighten readers and writers’ perspectives about gender identity and sexual orientation.”

While J writes in multiple genre formats, she does not engage in genre-fluid work as defined at the beginning of the project. Her interests are broad, and she writes frequently and effectively, but her writing corpus encompasses multiple purposes. As currently defined, genre fluidity encompasses two writing strategies that J seems to be on the cusp of engaging in.

M'J: BLACK AND QUEER

M'J⁶⁸ is a young Black queer man, stocky and brown-skinned, who wears caps and scarves year-round. He is an activist and community organizer with an associate's degree in family and community health from Pitt Community College and a B.S. in diversity and social justice from East Carolina University. He began working in his first post-college professional job—as a community advocate for people living with HIV and AIDS diagnoses—only a few months prior to beginning this study. M'J first learned about the job opening in the community advocate program, because it is an extension of the clinic where he has been in treatment for several years. His volunteer activities include mentoring youth activists and serving on the board of trustees in his faith community.

When the study began, I had known M'J for three years⁶⁹. He transferred to East Carolina University the same semester I began my doctoral program there, we had overlapping social circles, and he also worked on campus. He worked at the university's cultural center and at the coffee shop inside the main library at East Carolina. Anytime I needed to schedule after-five office hours or paper conferences with my students, I would meet them at the library coffee shop—and M'J was almost always there. For the first year or so of our acquaintance, we were just that, nodding acquaintances, but we have since become close friends.

The first time we really spent time together was when someone donated a couple of tickets to the local county NAACP chapter's annual Freedom Fund banquet. Since I could not give the other ticket to one of my own students, when I was asked if I knew another student who might be interested, I suggested M'J—and then we sat together at that banquet. Not too long after, I ran into him at a rally where we both showed up to protest the short-lived but high-profile anti-working-class and anti-trans state law. Our friendship

⁶⁸ "M'J" is a pseudonym, not a name or nickname this participant uses in any context. It incorporates some of his initials, and is formatted in a way that retains Black identity markers, which his full name also has. He and I agreed this is an important choice that deliberately foregrounds his Blackness. Although many people in the local community as well as at East Carolina University and Pitt Community College—especially those who know M'J or know me—are likely to easily recognize him from this case study and from images associated with it, we have agreed together to use this alternate name in the case study's text. Though he is open about those identities with people he knows—and he is a highly-visible member of the local community—his name is obscured in this project.

⁶⁹ As this case study profile will make clear, I know M'J in ways I do not know the other participants in the study. In keeping with my commitment to transparency, I have not tried to obscure this relationship in any way. That relationship allows for perhaps a thicker description in this case study, and in some cases that prior knowledge allowed me to ask follow-up questions in interviews that I was not able to do with other participants. Again, I acknowledge this openly, but do not see it as inherently problematic—as this study is not focused on comparing participants to each other. Instead, the exploratory, phenomenological design of the study relies on the richness of the collective data set—which is not poorer for the depth of the friendship. And as Patterson (2019) has noted, queer kinship networks can be both important and effective for recruiting participants in well-constructed research studies.

eventually grew through shared social activities—a weekly lunch group, a trivia team, and a game night we have both been part of—but also spending a lot of time together one-on-one. We have some similarities in our backgrounds as well as our personalities, and he eventually claimed me as an academic mentor—sometimes introducing me to people as his academic mom⁷⁰.

For our first interview, scheduled for a Saturday morning, M'J showed up looking the same as he almost always does: wearing dark colors with multiple layers and long sleeves, draped in a scarf and jewelry, and wearing his ever-present grey knitted skullcap. At 10 o'clock on a weekend morning, he was—characteristically—on his second or third stop of the day and ready to talk. After months as a “nomad” (his terminology) without a permanent address or steady employment, the income from M'J's new job had allowed him to sign a lease on an apartment, and he was still adjusting to having an apartment of his own and excited about his new position. He was also nervous to be interviewed that first time, which, given his ebullient personality, was definitely uncharacteristic. As with every recording in the study, both interviews and the intermittent recording of group conversations, I began with confirming that participants knew the recording had started. This first section of the transcript, where I started with warm-up question about writing, makes that hesitation quite clear:

Ruby: First I would like to make sure that I'm on record as recording the interview at this point. This is M'J's first interview for the study. And M'J, you are aware that you are being recorded?

[pause]⁷¹

M'J: Yes.

Ruby: Okay, all right, so first I want to ask you about how you define writing.

M'J: How do I define writing? Okay.

[pause]

⁷⁰ We have the kind of friendship that includes a lot of laughter as well as occasional long discussions on deep topics. He has given me rides to the airport, and I have given him feedback on writing projects. He has brought his laundry to my house, entertained me when I struggled to focus on my work, called me from the emergency room after an accident when another driver's SUV totaled his car, and brought dinner over when I was visiting a dying friend. I was honored to be asked to design his graduation invitation when he finished his bachelor's degree, and to be invited out to celebrate with his family after the ceremony. I'm the proud bonus mom who heard him deliver the keynote at the departmental graduation the following year, taught him how to bake, and was in the audience when he came out as HIV-positive to his faith community. He is the son of my heart as well as a friend with whom I can laugh and cry in turn. We are part of a *queer fam* network of family relationships that include our 'made' queer family (of which M'J is one of “the kids”) and a few allies designated as honorary queer fam members.

⁷¹ As previously noted, only extended pauses are included in the transcripts. In general, other paralinguistic cues and very brief pauses are not noted—as those were not the focus of this study.

Uh—

[indistinct whispering]

Ruby: No, just go with it.

[laughter]⁷²

M'J: No one else can hear this, right? Just you?⁷³

Ruby: Right.

[more laughter]

M'J: All right, cool then, we can just have a nice normal little conversation!

Ruby: Yeah, and remember, remember what it said in the [disclosure and consent] papers, right? That unless you give me specific additional written permission, then no audio recording will be played [for any audience]. I'll use transcripts, so, typed up versions of it.

M'J: Okay, cool. [he returns to the initial question]

Just a week or two before this first meeting, I heard M'J give a talk where he punctuated his remarks with a litany of many components of his identity—part of his challenge in that moment to listeners to embrace difference in themselves and in others within the community. That litany had been brave and expansive, and I (of course) was hoping for a similar series when I asked my scripted question about identity. As the transcript shows, I even referenced that talk as an additional prompt:

Ruby: Okay, so how do you define or describe yourself? As a person, not as a writer? I remember you making a list the other day. Because I heard you speak not too long ago.

M'J: [laughter]

Ruby: And you were talking about some components of your identity. And I'm really interested—of course—in this for this study, in terms of kind of talking about how different components of people's intersectional identities impact the work that they do.

M'J: I am more than just a Black body. I'm a person. I'm more than a statistic. I am—Of course, I am African American. I am queer. I am Muslim-ish. I do not hold any political party identity...so I'm

⁷² As already noted, laughter that is shared or sustained has been included in the transcripts. M'J laughs often, sometimes at length and infectiously, and I have purposely included those moments of extended and/or shared laughter to celebrate rather than mute Black Joy.

⁷³ To be clear, M'J knew the interview was being recorded for the study (as was documented at the beginning of the conversation) and his question here is a joking response. He knew the interview would be transcribed, and is one of the writing group participants to provide written permission for use (in this dissertation, and for publications and conference presentations) of both the transcripts and the original recordings from his interviews.

right there in the middle. I have a happy balance. From there I tend to be liberal, in a lot of my decision-makings.

I am financially well-off now—but, before, I was not. I was in poverty. I am an uncle, a brother, a son. That's just all the intersectionalities⁷⁴ of who I am. I'm a scholar. I'm a writer. I mean, well, I'm not a *writer-writer-writer*.

[laughter]

But—

[extended laughter]

M'J: I am a[n interfaith] church member. I'm so much other stuff, the list can go on of what I am.



Figure 7—Painted portrait of M'J (image courtesy J. M. Bradsher)

While not so confident about his writerly identity, M'J was definitive in many other ways about who he is.

Additional identities I recall him mentioning, in the prepared remarks mentioned earlier, included descriptions

⁷⁴ For clarity, M'J was well aware that intersectionality theory is not about individual identities. And though *intersectionality* gets used by many people, in and out of context in a variety of ways, here he uses the term intersectionality (in the informal, not-quite-correct, and commonly-used sense) to mean *multiplicity of identity* or *multiple marginalized identities*. In addition to the discussion in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, find more on the origins and use of intersectionality theory by reading the critical race scholarship of Crenshaw (for example: 1991; 1995; and Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). For its uptake in social science and education, see the work of Hill Collins (including 2015).

of himself as a leader, as HIV positive, as an activist, as having a learning disability, and as having graduated near the top of his class.

Before labeling himself as “not a *writer*-writer-writer” in that first interview, M’J had already described writing very specifically: “Communication. Sharing ideas. Expressing oneself.” Based on that description of what writing is, I asked him about his own work as a writer. In the following exchange, he first said he was not a successful writer—but my pushback about how that statement was in opposition to his characterization of himself as a good communicator had an interesting outcome:

M’J: I’m going to say that I’m not the best writer there is ‘cause I do still make mistakes. I’m not the best writer there is. I do still make mistakes, so I’m a little, right there on the edges.

Ruby: Well, you said writing is good for communication.

M’J: Yeah, I’m good at that. Yeah.

Ruby: So if that’s what you’re trying to do, and you’re doing that, doesn’t that make you successful?

M’J: It does, cause whenever you actually convey yourself to an audience through your writing, when you get your message across, when you’re telling your story, and you’re trying to tell a story—and they are obtaining what you are saying and you’re trying, they like it, and you are persuading. Then yes, I am doing that! And I am proud of that!

Once he agreed that he was a writer—saying “I write about issues that are important to me—important to me and other people like me”—I continued our discussion by asking him about what kind of writer he is:

M’J: Sometimes when I write poems, they don’t necessarily rhyme, or they don’t follow the normal poetic ways. It’s a little different. It’s kind of like being fluid. My writing is a little fluid. But I can do argument, papers and stuff like that, but I tend to be more fluid in my writing. Maybe an essay, but it can be a poem. It can be short; it can be rather long. I have a lot of different forms of writing. I have my own forms of writing. And I think that’s okay.

Ruby: It sounds like you are describing yourself as someone who doesn’t necessarily follow the rules. Or doesn’t see them as important.

M’J: No.

Ruby: Is that accurate?

M’J: Yes, because, beforehand, we didn’t have rules to writing.

[laughter]

Ruby: They’ve been around longer than I have, that’s for sure!

[laughter]

Ruby: I'm not from that time.

[laughter]

M'J: No, particularly when we're thinking about writing, you're thinking about that from a Western perspective. We're not thinking about other cultural perspectives of writing, and there's different ways people write.

I mean when you listen to different version[s] of the Koran, it is a version of writing. It's the writing of a book, but when you hear it it's like a poem. A big book of poems.

Ruby: So what kinds of writing do you do? You mentioned poetry already.

M'J: Yeah. Poetry.

Ruby: But I know that's not all.

M'J: Poetry, essay, sometimes, I try to do persuasive writing or just write about different viewpoints, whatever you call that.

Even when not focused on specifically identifying himself as a writer or communicator, M'J always clearly sees himself as an activist for social justice. He said he is working to create a more just and equitable society, including with his work as a writer and speaker.

Ruby: What do you want or need to accomplish through the writing that you do?

M'J: Social and societal change. I'm trying to help people help themselves to inspire change in a sense. What I'm doing—what my writing do is tryna help bridge gaps, help people understand that there are some issues need to be talked about, that there is some issues that is impacting everyone, and those policies. [I want] to incite change for their community and their society.

Make it more egalitarian and humanitarian type thing, because there are some policies that shouldn't be. And there's some policies that shouldn't be, in any form of existence. 'Cause it is discriminating towards a lot of people. And that's why I feel like it is wrong.

Ruby: That's what you *want* and *need* to accomplish. What would you *like* to accomplish in addition to that?

M'J: I would like to accomplish, um. [long pause] I would like to accomplish [pause] it may be unrealistic, but I would like the writing that I do [to] inspire individuals to do the change. I would like to see changes made. Through writing and also advocating. I mean, I think that's what you're trying to say.

Ruby: I'm asking *you* what you wanted to say.

[laughter]

M'J: I mean, it's a lot I would like to say, but—watch your time. [laughs]

Ruby: Yeah, I think that there are a lot of—and I'll ask you more about social change in a minute—but what the specifics are. It's different, and, your one ultimate goal is not necessarily about one person.

M'J: I also think about educating people, am I right? It's about educating. Based on that initial interview with M'J—and on work he has done in the past—it was clear that social change and educating or informing people were his primary goals. As our conversation continued, I asked M'J more about how things might be different if his dream of a society that is socially and economically just were to become a reality. At first he hesitated, and claimed not to have thought that far into the future:

Ruby: What would societal change and educating people look like? How would you define that? What form would that take? How would things be different? [pause] If you accomplish that?

M'J: [pause] That's, that's. I haven't thought that far. [small laugh] Actually. But within one minute, literally, of saying he had not yet thought through what changes he wants to see, he began to outline that hoped-for future:

More progressive changes. More understanding that their policies and laws that people put into law, affects people. And what they should understand is that people are human beings. So the idea of social change in writing—what it is to me is talking about different topics that impact people and putting the person first.

My goals is to change the laws that dehumanize people. We don't need laws that dehumanize people. People who feel discriminat[ory] towards [the] LGBT community. Laws like that, that's actually geared—that actually are targeting people who are marginalized. Change in the sense of people who are marginalized being free from these laws that oppresses them. That's the societal change that I'm thinking about. (M'J)

I asked him to continue this description, specifically for global and local contexts, and asked about how it might impact his life as well. As the following discussion illuminates, M'J's primary hesitation came when thinking of personal impacts. He clearly put himself last—even though my question in this initial interview had put him first as an individual.

Ruby: If you achieve the success in educating people and bringing about societal change through policy change—'cause you've more specifically said, societal change in terms of progressive anti-oppressive policies—what would be different about you? And about the community, and about the world? If you succeeded at these goals?

M'J: It would give us a sense of accomplishment, identity, and purpose. And that everyone is feeling less oppressed and can be themselves without these strict laws that oppresses them. So the world will be more: more egalitarian, more livable, more sustainable. More people can live freely, free to be.

They can walk outside without wondering “Will I make it back home? Will I make it back home to my family?” That will be something to look forward to.

Ruby: Yes, that would change the community.

M'J: That sense of hope they can have then. That's all they have, is people's sense of hope when everything else was gone. So giving that sense of hope, a sense of freedom, a sense of liberty.
[pause] To live.

Ruby: Thinking about what you said before about your identity. Muslim-ish—

[laughter]

—queer, Black man in a society where those changes happened, where those identities weren't markers of oppression, or sources of oppression. How's that change who you are?

[long pause]

Ruby: For instance, it doesn't change what you look like, right? But, we know that race is a social construct, right? Oh, but the disparate impacts of appearance that is associated with race is very real.

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: So, if those disparities in terms of safety in public spaces, in terms of perception, in terms of access to legal rights, if those were no longer different in any way based on race, would that change your identity?

M'J: Not so much. I would still be a Black person who will be able to live [laughs]. I'll be a Black person who would be able to live without experiencing— I wouldn't have to worry about walking the street or getting pulled over. Or I don't have to worry about being followed in a store. I don't have to worry about wearing a hoodie, 'cause everyone wears hoodies. I wouldn't have to worry about being one of those statistics—like one out of three Black men who end up in jail. I wouldn't have to worry about that.

Oh, they could sit there and judge me based on how I react or based off my character. If I'm a bad person, they'd be put me in jail for that. [laughter] Not because I'm Black, or because I'm perceived to be a threat when I walk down the street. I imagine all that being wiped away and I am just a normal person. Just with a different level of melanin. [more laughter]

What genre-fluid strategies does M'J use? M'J uses both forms of genre fluidity in his writing, in and out of professional contexts. That is, he writes in multiple distinct genre forms with one general purpose, and he also writes in ways that blur, blend, and ignore genre conventions. His speeches have litanies and stories and poetry (and sometimes scripted drama) woven into them. His professional presentations for his work often pair personal and community narratives with health information, and a panel discussion may be delivered as a case study or as a history lesson.

One central way M'J enacts both definitions of genre fluidity is by embedding storytelling in every project, whether or not narrative is an expected convention for a genre format he is ostensibly using, and

whether or not he is using a specific genre format at all. He sees his life as part of a larger human story—specifically that of the Black experience in the United States—and frames his activism and his writing in that larger context. In the first of his final interviews⁷⁵, he situated the stories he tells this way:

We, as African Americans, have been here just as long as the Founding Fathers has been here. If you really think about it, we actually built this place, you know? We built this place. Everything. The White House, we built. A lot of the universities, like Harvard, we built. A lot of churches that a lot of white people and officials went to, we built.

So, in a sense, we have been here for a while, and from my understanding the value of that, I can say I am proud. I'm proud to be a part of history that has been here for a while. (M'J)

His professional work centers on educating readers and listeners about (and advocating for people who are) living with HIV. This work has included presentations, videos, speeches, sermons, blog posts, website content, and text for an art exhibition. He also writes proposals, poems, short memoir, and essays as part of his community organizing projects. In every case, M'J says social justice advocacy begins with “talking about different topics that impact people and putting the person first.” Humanizing issues with storytelling is his way to give audiences “different opportunities and different ways, [because] then people are more likely to grasp the ideas, and be understanding, and open their mindset.” In many ways, his writing through storytelling is a purposeful way to blend education and advocacy. At our first interview, he described future goals related to these strategies as follows:

Hopefully one day in the future, I can get a lot of stories from people. Living with different things. Experiencing different things. Especially people living with HIV, if I can write a book on them. And hopefully I can share their stories with the world one day. [pause] It can happen, like—

[big sigh] You know how much it would change people? (M'J)

How and why does he use these strategies? M'J deliberately infuses his own story and the personal stories of others into his work as a way to connect and inspire. “When I write, I write about issues that are important to me—important to me and other people like me,” M'J said in the first interview. The purpose that drives him becomes part of his message.

⁷⁵ As I noted in the methods (Ch. 3), there was a recording glitch with the first version of M'J's final interview, so after that was discovered, we later met again to re-do the part of the interview that was not captured on the recording of the first closing interview.

M'J's writing process begins with a genre-less assemblage that includes using the edges of his computer monitor—and sometimes his pockets—as a functional commonplace book. He collects quotes widely, and he tends to write them on small bits of paper which he carries around and then affixes to the edges of his desktop computer monitor. He then will sometimes make notes about how those quotes inspire him or what they make him think about. These collected quotes often eventually become the inspiration for a writing project. “If it’s a quote about, you know, humanity, then I just draw off that,” M'J said during a writing group meeting where tools and technologies of the writing process were a topic of conversation, and “the essence of that quote bleeds into” the writing project: “It goes from this one quote to branching out, talking about it.” The use of a quote as an inspiration is a way for him to focus, he said in that same meeting, but is also a way for him to connect to his interlocutors:

Quotes are a part of storytelling, in a way. And when you start [with] certain quotes that hook you, then you can start putting the information in bit by bit, and lightly edit it so that quote bleeds into your writing,...your data. So that’s how I do it. Because people are engaged more with quotation as some way of telling a story. (M'J)

As M'J emphasized in the first of our final interviews, he believes his approach always needs to be one where “the audience can get something out of it, so they can feel it.” He described his process for framing any writing project as follows:

This writing is for this particular audience, so I have to try to connect them to the piece through, maybe, storytelling, and offer them facts afterwards, because a lot of people know stories. You hear the stories, and let’s say you’re presenting to doctors or scientists.

That’s not typically my audience. I might have a few doctors and individuals that are there, but the context is different. They’re not going there to hear a scientific breakthrough. They’re hearing a perspective of social justice, a perspective of my HIV work that encompasses what I have to communicate to individuals. (M'J)

M'J knows that his objective is never to provide a scientific lecture. Instead, when he is writing a presentation for a community group, he will be addressing people from varied backgrounds with a range of scientific literacies and perhaps no awareness of what living with HIV can be. In other contexts, he is writing material for readers with limited literacy, delivering speeches for faith-based congregations who know almost nothing about HIV, or writing poetry asserting his own humanity as a queer Black man living with HIV.

In all cases, he is working to connect with his audiences. “Human beings are really emotional creatures,” M’J said in a writing group meeting. “We are. One thing that taps into our emotions of who we are is storytelling.” In the same way that he relies on human connection as impetus for his activism, he further noted at that group meeting, those connections that have worked for him as a reader and listener are the ones he employs in his own writing:

It’s about the heart of a person, and I think it’s okay to be reasonable and logical about all things, make sure you have the data and the facts. But some people, in order for them to really grasp or to understand, you have to first tap into those emotions of being this human.

See, because if you come to me with core facts, I’m like, “Mm-hm. Already lost me.” So it’s a way of, how you get people in? and sometimes quotes and storytelling is a good way of doing it. (M’J)

M’J employs genre fluidity when he tells stories, using narrative, memoir, and autobiography across a wide range of genre formats—all with social justice goals. Even when he is writing a grant (for community education about living with HIV) or providing training for healthcare professionals (in support of racial and economic equity in health care access), he is telling stories and focusing on his most central message, which is the value of a shared humanity. He sees writing and communicating as strategies to make change, to educate, and to advocate. He is trying, always, to support social and economic justice.

What role do M’J’s identities play in determining which genre-fluid strategies he uses? M’J

often begins his writing projects with quotes, and he infuses the work with a story. His idea of himself as human with much in common with the rest of humanity, embodied as a Black queer man, directly connects to the genre-fluid way he drafts in a commonplace book sort of format. One quote he mentioned to the writing group as influential makes this clear:

“I am the universe, and I am this, I am that.” It’s found in many spiritual sources, but also kind of a lot of secular sources. It’s really interesting when you put like a scientific notion on “what I am.” I am, like, your true star dust. I am the Earth. Because when you die you go back to the Earth, which is an amazing thing that you can find in secular writings also. So I try to pull from different areas. (M’J)

He drafts all kinds of projects by starting with humanity, then making connections, and then ties everything together by telling stories. He embodies genre fluidity in his composing process as well as in the final versions of his writing work.

Some of M'J's identities are less immediate, less visible—such as his health status and his religion—but it is his Blackness that is most evident “every time” he goes anywhere or does anything. Because that is seen first by others, he almost always has to deal with its attendant “stigma and discrimination” as the primary facet of his identity. Even though he should not. He discussed this central racialized identity in the first interview:

It [race] is a social construct. So, it's not really real, but the consequences of racism exist, so we have to deal with that. It's just I have darker melanin than you do, and than [people] who are non-Black.

So, having that identity, how a society functions based off white supremacy—favoring individuals who are white more than those who are Black—this shapes who I am and how I walk through the world. So, I have to be cautious of things I do, things I say, and even, maybe, things I write. So, yeah, it's really crucial. It's like, I was just born this way, okay? (M'J)

He credits this aspect of his identity as being central to his focus on human connections: “I’m fighting for justice, not just justice for a small minority, but justice for all people,” he said in his first final interview, then

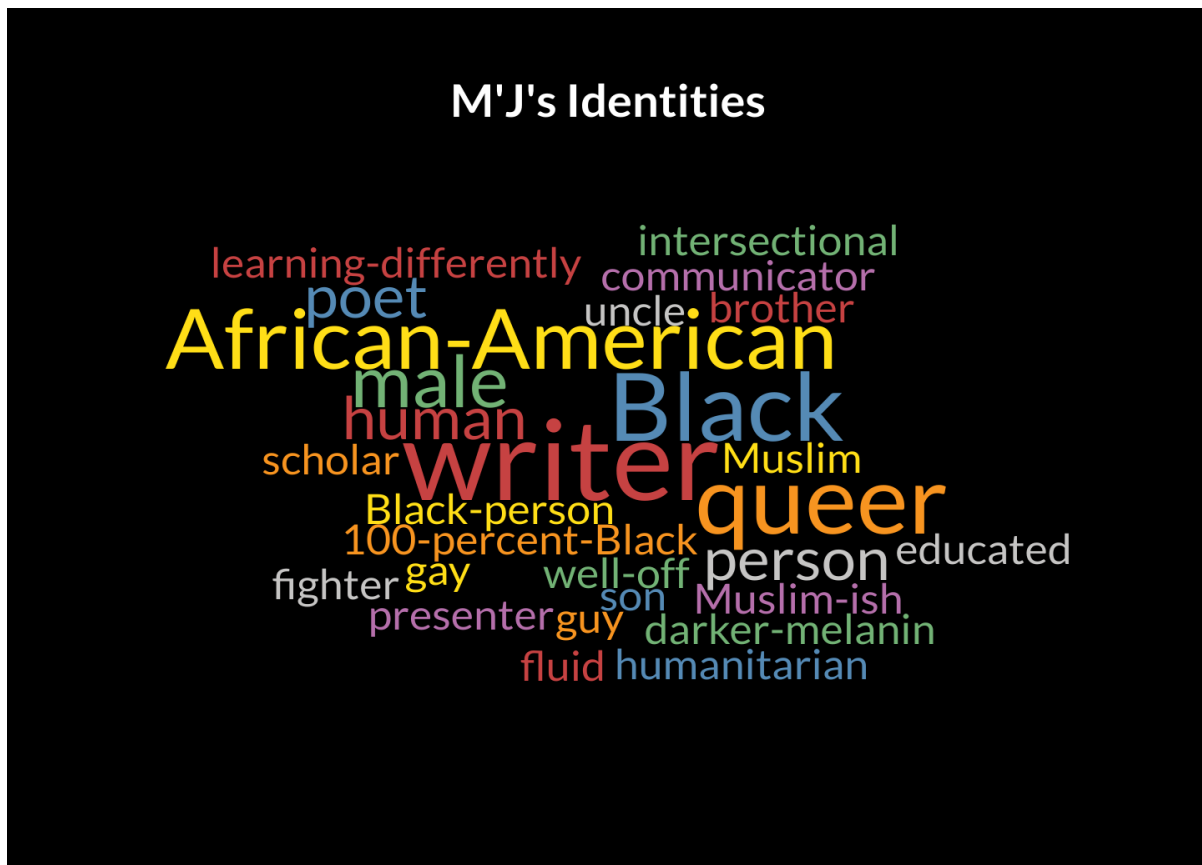


Figure 8 - M'J's identities

noted:

It's diversity when you have all the bodies there, right? You have a diverse people from different race, gender orientation, gender expression, et cetera. But the inclusion part is including the experiences, the voices, and the words of people who have been marginalized. You know what I'm saying?

So, that's inclusion. That's how I feel that my voice is being heard, right? So, if you want African Americans and trans people at the table, have them at the table and let them talk for themselves. (M'J)

M'J brings narrative and memoir to a variety of writing tasks, framing what he feels are the important stories for readers and listeners. His work and activism often put him in front of audiences, so he is visibly Black when he delivers the presentations he creates. In the first final interview, he noted that even when not public speaking or using video tools which make his Blackness one of the first things people see, this aspect of his identity is still critical:

When I write, of course, I'm 100 percent Black. I'm a Black person writing and trying to get my point across to all types of audiences. So I have to navigate the audience in how I write as an African American person. (M'J)

And for M'J, this particular identity certainly comes through, even when he is not visible to readers. In his second final interview, he spoke again about this: "I cannot write outside of my race. Right? If you really think about it," he said, pointing out that his name is an identity marker that is heavily coded as Black. "I write as a Black person, so when someone comes across 'written by [a name like mine],' they see a picture of a Black person's face."

During the course of this project, M'J was one of a group of individuals who were featured subjects in a visual artist's show. In that exhibit, life-sized painted portraits⁷⁶ of each featured person were displayed on the exterior of small curtained chambers, and the interior of the chambers included artifacts representing each person's interior emotions. In addition to sitting for the life-sized portrait, M'J collaborated with the artist to develop a series of hashtags to represent his emotions, and those were written on the surface of a mirror with a rainbow frame. Even with the focus on emotions, M'J's identity is central. These descriptive hashtags were arranged as a litany, beginning with "I am #MoreThanJustABlackBody" and ending with "I am

⁷⁶ The portrait of M'J appeared on a previous page in this case study (Figure 7).

#MoreThanYouCanEverImagine.”

This writing was a collaboration, part of a multimodal project, and is a further example of how identity for him is central to all the writing he does.

“My identities do influence my writing as an African American and queer person,” M’J said in our second final interview, especially for the subject matter he focuses on, which “actually impacts African Americans and Blacks, whether it be socioeconomic status, HIV status, or STI statuses.” And his queer identity is just as relevant as his Black identity. In his second closing interview, he described that connection:

When you think about it, even within the LGBTQ, the romantic/sexual/gender minorities—as one of those people who identify as that—you are a queer person but you’re a queer Black person. It intersects. You cannot separate those two because when you’re writing about queer studies or when you’re writing about something dealing with LGBTQ issues or projects dealing with that, then you also embody both identities. People of color who are LGBTQ do not get recognized as much. (M’J)

This intersection of being Black and being queer is where M’J always writes and speaks, and his identity is always present, so every strategic genre-fluid choice he makes is always directly connected to both identities.

What role do M’J’s contexts play in determining which genre-fluid strategies he uses? M’J’s multiple identities also mean that he may be marginalized in different ways in different social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts. In his work with faith communities, for example, when he speaks in a Black church he is in a social and cultural space where his race may be affirmed and his gender and education level may be privileged, but he is nonetheless queer and Muslim and living with HIV. When he speaks to a social group

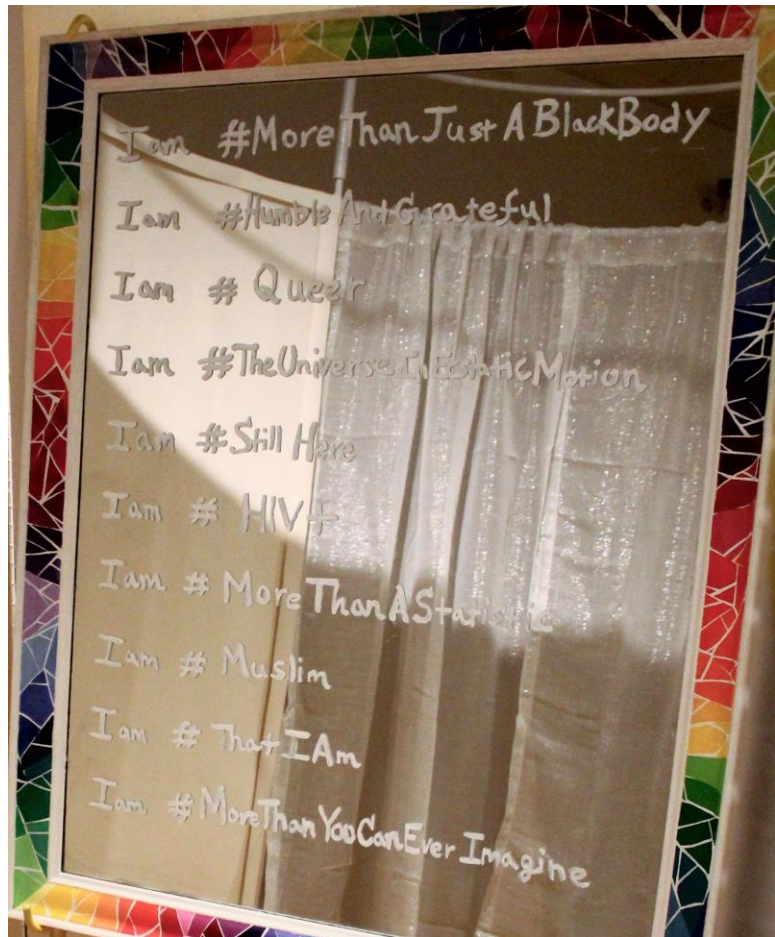


Figure 9 - Mirror from art installation, with hashtags written by M’J (photo courtesy J. M. Bradsher)

where many share his faith tradition, his gender may still carry privilege but identities such as being queer, speaking a vernacular English, or coming from a limited-resource background can still be read as not belonging.

Even when he is working in cultural and social contexts where more of his identities are welcomed and valued, he still sometimes is advocating for others with outsider status, and interpersonal contexts still are critical to the choices he makes. The day before our second final interview, he had been working to find housing for a Black trans woman who was unsheltered, and he was encountering barriers that were new, even to him. “After seeing what would happen to this lady who was being discriminated [against] by our community itself. It says community shelter, right? Community means everyone.” He’d been able to put together resources to cover a hotel room for a week and two weeks’ worth of meals, but he was also really tired and a bit discouraged when we met that day:

There are times when you just lose hope for humanity, like there’s no hope, but the idea that we should treat people as human beings first and foremost is really important. And we have to think about the rights of other people. And this is the local homeless shelter.

And the [person at the shelter told the trans woman], “We can’t accommodate you. We want to put you in the men’s section.” Well, if you do not live as a trans person you don’t understand their experiences and how traumatic that will be. These are important issues that I write about and talk about all the damn time. (M’J)

M’J had also recently been part of a Black issues community dialogue where gender and reproductive health care were the primary topic, and he drew connections between that event and his work trying to find shelter for a woman the previous day: “We’re fighting for rights here.” He said then that he sees both reproductive rights and providing shelter to trans women as a single continuum of equity for all people—and one he has some responsibility for:

These ladies are fighting for their rights and I cannot deny their rights. I can use my male privilege to help them push forward. There’s some times when even Black [men]—we can’t really use our male privilege because you know our masculinity, it’s been hyper-sexualized or it seems like we are seen as brutes in other ways. But still, I can fight for women’s rights using my privilege. (M’J)

Contexts—especially social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts—strongly determine M’J’s use of genre fluidity when he writes. He employs multiple genre forms within specific texts he creates for his job and in his public communication work, especially in the use of storytelling in even the most clinical setting; and he also

creates a range of more conventional texts, including poetry and memoir, with a singular focus on justice for all people.

CHAPTER WRAP-UP

This fifth chapter has presented case studies that focus on the identities of participants, their perspectives on writing, the goals they have as activists, and their experiences during the time they participated in the study. I closed each case study by addressing the research questions based on each individual participant. Previous chapters framed genre fluidity and associated concepts by drawing on scholarship in writing studies and rhetorical genre studies and discussing the published work of prolific genre-fluid writers. In previous chapters I also theorized identity as embodied and multiplicitous and as a useful framework for critical praxis, and I discussed my project's methodologies and methods. In Chapter 4, I discussed in detail the lived contexts of study participants, demonstrating the complex spaces and places where writing group members advocate for social and economic justice.

My next chapter focuses on the writing group in a collective way, centering on data collected by recording some of the conversations from writing group meetings, and on analysis and discussion of that data. Chapter 6 also includes information about the impacts individual group members identified as a result of their participation, and it discusses the potential of interaction with other writers as important engagement for community activists. The final chapter offers a discussion of findings and conclusions arising from the contributions of this project's participants, framed as answers to the four research questions at the center of this project. That final chapter also addresses limitations of the study and concludes with implications and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 6—ENGAGEMENT IN WRITING COMMUNITY: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPACTS

I defined and explored multiple facets of genre fluidity through writing transfer studies and rhetorical genre studies scholarship in Chapter 1, where I also defined critical terms and concepts, provided a literature review, and began modeling genre fluidity through the use of digressions and other genre interruptions. Chapter 2 showcased high-profile activist-writers as examples of how genre fluidity provided pathways for them to connect their identities and their writing activism. In Chapter 3, I theorized identity as an embodied and intersectional framework for praxis, and I detailed my methodologies and methods for this project. In Chapter 4, I discussed the social, political, historical, and geographic contexts within which the study participants live and engage in activism. Chapter 5 consists of case studies for each of the four study participants, discussing their writing work in detail, based largely on individual interviews at the beginning and end of the study.

In this next chapter, I explore more of the data from my research, focusing on recorded conversations from writing group meetings. Specifically, I present transcripts of two group conversations from those meetings⁷⁷, with my analysis embedded as annotations in the form of sidebars. Following the annotated meeting transcripts, I discuss the impacts of the study on each group member, and I conclude the chapter with their reflections on the experience.

⁷⁷ At the first of three meetings selected for recording, only two participants were able to attend; one was at an early part of the session and was not able to stay, and another came late. As a result, what was recorded on that date is primarily individual conversations with Dave and with M'J—and I have not included those in this analysis of the group meeting.

Transcript 1 is from a writing group meeting⁷⁸ where Allie, M’J, and I were the participants attending that day. It was a Saturday morning, and M’J was barely awake at the beginning of the meeting. Among other topics, we talked in this meeting⁷⁹ about possible connections between genre forms, bad experiences with writing instruction, and much more. I began recording after we had a brief check-in conversation, and kept recording through the rest of the meeting.

TRANSCRIPT 1: ALLIE, M’J, & RUBY

Ruby: We are recording this part of the conversation today. I’m interested in talking a little bit about how the different genre forms that you write in might impact each other. Not necessarily in the sense of, if I know how to write a good introduction, I might use that in a different genre form, and still think “okay, this is a way to construct an introduction.” I’m not talking about that kind of thing.

I’m talking about how the kinds of writing you do in one place might blur or blend or bleed over into another, and maybe some back and forth sort of things, and maybe some things get mixed together every once in a while.

Allie: [to M’J] Does anything come to mind for you?

M’J: I’m not right now. You go start. You start.

Allie: Sure, yeah. November is National Novel Writing Month⁸⁰, and the goal is to have 50,000 words by the end of the month. I’ve tried it multiple times before and I’ve never succeeded, but I’m trying again. And right now I have about 2,700 words for a fiction book, I guess. We’ll see how it goes. Novel, maybe.

I’ve been thinking about genre a lot because I don’t really know where this is going. I have some general ideas of what I might want to do, but I was like, let me just write a draft of a manuscript and see what happens. I’m thinking a lot about genre, and like what that looks like.

SIDEBAR: CROSSING GENRE LINES

Allie began the conversation with a discussion of crossing genre lines within creative writing (or perhaps literature). As an English major and creative writer, her go-to definition of genre is of course grounded in literary genres. However, this text that started out as a “novel, maybe” already had elements of journalistic writing mixed in. And as the conversation continued, we discussed theatrical dialogue and translation as possible kinds of writing that may be emerging in the drafting stage.

As previously noted in the case study chapter, Allie drafts many texts in a genre-fluid way, ignoring genre conventions and boundaries, even though in some cases those “raw” drafts become source material used in a variety of conventional genre formats. This project is an example of that multi-genre single-text strategy of genre fluidity.

⁷⁸ November 2018.

⁷⁹ Note that transcripts from recorded group meetings in this chapter have been edited to remove repetitive statements and occasional unrelated side comments or short tangents. Otherwise, the same light editing standards (described in the previous chapter) used for the interview transcript have been applied here. In general, the transcripts reflect the conversations and feel of the meeting. My analysis and commentary throughout the transcript are presented as sidebars to allow the flow of conversation to be continuous.

⁸⁰ Often abbreviated to the wonderful mash-up *NaNoWriMo*.

I'm trying to develop my characters right now, and I've been writing a lot about them cooking and making decisions about food—so it's almost like journalistic writing, but it's in third person. It's weird. I see the mixing. And then especially with dialogue, I feel like genre doesn't even exist when I'm thinking about my dialogue. I think about the people I know. I don't think about examples and things I've read before. That's what I've been thinking about a lot lately.

Ruby: I think some people would think of dialogue as kind of theatrical. It's the banter sort of thing, and there's kind of a theatricality to the way sometimes dialogue is written. It's thought of as a performance.

You said you were not thinking about [the NaNoWriMo project] in terms of other kinds of forms, but just in terms of what conversations are like. Do you feel like you're more a part of the conversation when you're writing those kinds of things, rather than an observer of a performance of a conversation?

Allie: When I write it, I feel like I'm a translator. I know what my character—I think about what they're feeling and how to communicate that to the other character in the dialogue, and I think that's because that's what I do in a lot of my daily communications. I really, I try to do a lot of active listening where I'm like, “okay, this is what I'm hearing you say, and this is—” I feel like translation is kind of a natural urge for me, so I see that a lot in my dialogue when I write it.

Ruby: How does that connect with the poetry and the lesson plans and the notes and the thoughts and the journal writing and all the other stuff that you do?

Allie: Well, I think it connects to that idea of the omniscient narrator [as] that observant person in general. When that is the voice in the poetry—I wrote a poem last Sunday about the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, and I had a similar role in that. I was a narrator telling, translating the event into terms for a specific reader.

And then [heavy sigh], I haven't done a lot of journaling this week, but it does connect because it's that role of listening, being a listener. I had themes of that in the classroom yesterday, and I had themes of that in that poem. I had themes of that at the writing center this week.

So yeah, the listening part, as a writer, for me is really important because I take what I hear and I do something with it. I change it and translate it.

SIDEBAR: LISTENING &TRANSLATION

Here Allie connected the use of narrator “voice” and what she terms “translation” techniques, from novel writing to writing poetry. She also made connections to journaling as a path to writing poetry—and to writing lesson plans. In general, her depiction of the theme of listening as something that crosses from her journaling and poetry and novel writing into both of her workplace illustrates the multiple-text single-idea strategy of genre fluidity.

She identified herself as a kind of translator in personal and professional situations, and it seems that recognizing this common aspect of her self-identity allows her to make connections across genre boundaries. In the discussion that follows, she returned briefly to literary genres but then jumped from there back to another of the political and cultural contexts that directly influenced her writing at the time.

Ruby: Does the kind of listening that you are doing or the kinds of things that you are hearing when you listen impact the genre forms that you decide to use when you are writing?

Allie: Yeah, maybe. Right now I don't know where this novel is going in terms of genre because I have this inkling that my character is going to be somewhat meta-human, and she's got an intuition that I keep writing about: this crackling kind of feeling, or a lot of feeling in her shoulders and between her shoulders. And I'm thinking ultimately one of her abilities is gonna be to reunite people and connect people to the others that they have lost.

Which I know sounds so left field. But that does have a lot to do with my listening because I've been thinking a lot about the caravan [of Central American refugees] approaching [the Mexico-U.S. border], and I've been thinking a lot about the people who have already been separated at the border, what that is in terms of my own history with my dad being an immigrant and having dual citizenship for myself.

So my genre forms really do play with themes of life, but I also don't pick one and run with it. I kind of mix them together, which is what you're studying. Oh my God! Oh no! I didn't even think about that!

Ruby: Right. Well, I'm also—

[laughter]

Allie: It's like you tricked me!

[much laughter]

Ruby: No. That's part of what fascinates me, right? You said that this is novel writing month, so I wonder how many people start writing, going, "I'm gonna write a novel," but then it turns into something else?

Allie: Yeah.

Ruby: Or how often people just start writing and then it turns into a novel, right? So this idea that we start with, "Okay, you're gonna write one of these now." And we start with that form or format or mode, even. But then we expect people to try to fit whatever it is they're doing—

Allie: Into that.

Ruby: —into that versus what happens when you don't start with that form. What does it come out as if you just write, and then try to decide what form you think that is after it's already happened? Even if you're writing a novel, quote-unquote novel, what is that really gonna turn out to be? Is it gonna be a straight up novel with that omniscient narrator? Is it gonna be interspersed with dialogue? Is it gonna have poems in the middle of it? Is it gonna have informational stuff in the middle of it?

M'J], to transition to talk about your work: a lot of your job right now involves [communicating] medical information and data and information about resources—as I'm understanding the work that you do, at least—to specific audiences and the clients that you work with.

I'm interested in how you [do] that. Because I know you write poetry, and I know that you also come from—recently, a lot of academic writing, and none of those were really the kind of writing that you're doing now. How do you use your poetic writing abilities, if you will, and how do you use your academic writing background? How does that meld into these new kinds of things that you are writing?

M'J: That's a lot. Okay.

Ruby: It is. I like to ask those kinds of questions with a lot of semicolons in them! That's what I'm good at!

[laughter]

M'J: I haven't been writing much because we are getting to the crunch of things at my job, and some people are on holiday, so some of us have to cover for them.

I have a lot of quotations in my cubicle, and I'll build my writing around a particular quote. So if it's a quote about humanity, then I just draw off that quote when I write something, the essence of that quote bleeds into my writing. It's kind of interesting. So it goes from this one quote to branching out, talking about it, maybe use the information. I [can] tell people, you know, engage with quotes. The essence of the quote is on the little paper, and [I] use it to focus. So I try to bleed myself in that together.

M'J: And far as the academic part, I haven't been writing academically, really.

Ruby: Well, no, not— but recently.

M'J: Recently.

Ruby: Because you finished school not too long ago, right?

M'J: Yeah. It's about a year now.

Ruby: Yeah, that's true. It's coming up on a year since you graduated, and since then you've written all kinds of other things.

M'J: I have. I have.

Ruby: Including speeches and sermons and public presentations. But you were writing a lot of papers before that.

M'J: Yeah, a lot of crap, looked like.

[laughter]

Ruby: Yeah.

M'J: I'm so happy that I don't have to do that now! Because now I see that instead of having the rules and regulations according to how you write papers from an academic standpoint, now I don't have to work like that. Now I can really creatively write, which is why I use quotes to use those throughout some of my work.

SIDEBAR: INSPIRED DRAFTING

Here M'J described one of his common drafting techniques here, detailed in the case study chapter, which he also discussed in an earlier meeting and in an interview. This assemblage method is based on materials from a slightly displaced sort of commonplace book where he collects his own work as well as other bits of text that inspire him.

Juxtaposing inspirational words or inspiring stories with health information and healthcare data is one way he makes use of the multiple genre conventions in a single text strategy of genre fluidity.

Perhaps most critical for this research project, M'J wrapped up that description of his process by saying he *bleeds himself into* his writing.

I've did that, and [in] the *Expressions*⁸¹ piece I was [using] Audre Lorde's quote and build[ing] on that. You can see real life through that one little quote, how I dive into homophobia, and all this injustice and oppression [that] just goes around in this society as it is today. That's how my work is coming out to be. Come from one quote, and the essence of that quote bleed[s] into my creative writing.

Ruby: You're talking about the "master's tools" quote, right?

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: Where she said the master's tools would not dismantle the master's house.

M'J: Where the "I Am" poem [another item published in *Expressions*] came from, the idea of the "I Am that I Am." It's a quote from the Christian Bible, the Hebrew Bible, stuff like that. But it also was found in other spiritual works also, "I Am that I Am."

Ruby: Yeah, it's a good one.

M'J: "I am the universe, and I am this, I am that." It's found in many spiritual sources, but also kind of a lot of secular sources. It's really interesting when you put like a scientific notion on what "I am." I am your true star dust. I am the Earth. Because when you die you go back to the Earth, which is an amazing thing that you can find in secular writings also. I try to pull from different areas.

Ruby: Yeah, it's interesting how identity impacts your writing and what your writing looks like, what shape it takes—not just in terms of genre or format but also in terms of content. And I think it's real interesting that you come to that so quickly in terms of talking about "I am." You're talking about identity, right? I'm interested in how your identity impacts the kind of writing that you do and what your writing looks like once it comes out.

M'J: [pause] My brain's still out.

Ruby: That's all right.

M'J: So I went to an art gallery with Jessica, and I used some of my writing, expressive writing through her work, even though it was an art gallery. She painted me⁸². But when you go in, you saw my writing.

Ruby: The work on the mirror⁸³.

SIDEBAR: WRITING IDENTITY

After his initial stalling, where he claimed to not be completely awake, M'J immediately started telling a story about, literally, writing his identity.

This discussion reiterated the way he brings himself into all of his writing work, infusing his identity into text within and across genre formats. This common way {for him) to approach projects, which comes before attention to genre conventions, allows M'J to use the single-focus, multi-text strategy of genre fluidity.

⁸¹ A cultural arts publication featuring the creative work of students at East Carolina University.

⁸² The portrait appears in the earlier case study chapter.

⁸³ Also in the case study chapter.

M'J: That was me. This is my poet[ic] way of saying “I am this, I am that.” But I used hashtags, I used that type of genre on the mirror. So when you look at it, you are seeing your reflection, but my words. So that’s one way everyone can go around looking at my writing.

Allie: What were some of the hashtags?

M'J: One of the things is [#]IAmMoreThanYouCanEverImagine. It’s the end of it. So it’s leaving that person like, “Ah, I want to know who this person is.” It’s funny because after that, a lot of people came up to me going, “Is that you?” I’m like, “Yeah.” “Your wording was really good.” I was like, “Thank you.”

Yeah, [this] was funny. I have to say, for real, it’s hilarious. So I was inside my own little—I don’t know what I called it.

Ruby: Booth, maybe?

M'J: Booth, where you saw the mirror. And when I stepped out, there was a photographer standing in front of it taking pictures. And when I was coming out, he [was] like—“I have to take a picture of you now!” [much laughter]

Ruby: You, coming out of your own thoughts and your own—

M'J: Yeah. It was like—

Ruby: —interior.

Allie: That’s really funny.

M'J: It was. But it is like, oh my gosh, a real person came out that thing!

Allie: Super meta.

Ruby: Right, right.

Allie: M’J-making machine!

M'J: That’s how I did! He was like, “I don’t—”

Ruby: That’s where he came from!

Allie: So funny.

Ruby: That is interesting.

M'J: But my writing actually—I kind of liked who was there because they were sitting there reading it. And I think Jess did a great job in capturing my emotions and who I was as a person in her art.

Ruby: Yeah. Well, and her focus in the show was on emotion, but you’re about to—

M'J: How do you say it?

[a brief edit here elides an exchange where none of us can say *Einfühlung*⁸⁴]

Ruby: [to M'J] Her art show [was] about people's emotions⁸⁵, and it's a picture of you about to burst into laughter—which I think people who know you understand that that's a very common thing! So [the painting is] very essentially M'J, and the things that are on that mirror are you, essentially M'J, as well. And the rainbow frame on the mirror, and the introspection and the self-adoration, right?

Because there were all these things rolled into that, and that's so much about who you are. But those words really—I think a lot of people would've known it was you without looking at the painting by looking at what was on the mirror.

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: That's the essence of who you are. It is words. It's images too, but it's words.

M'J: Especially our writing because that's just how my writing [is] out there. An' matter of fact, when we developed the mirror, what we were saying, I actually have a detailed list of what I am. I think it was at least 30. So we had to cut them out, and chose the best ones for it.

Except it was really hard. Because what you think in your mind sounds really good, but when you put it on paper, it's like, "what did I just say?" You have to think about it all over again. I do use my writing, [in] different forms. And at the art show, [I wrote about] part of who I was. So I'm trying to gear to a lot of audiences.

Ruby: Well, I'm really interested in how you take quotes to use that as your hook to build what is basically technical documents, right? Instead of starting with a bunch of data, you start with a theme, almost, with the quotes. You do that and then start blending with the information, right? As opposed to starting with a bunch of information and thinking "how can I package it?" you start with the packaging or overall framing, and then start putting things into it.

And, I'm sure that you're often doing presentations or creating documents or visuals that have [design] elements, even if they're not pictures. If you are doing PowerPoints and videos and those sorts of things, you're using those elements as well. Can you talk a little bit about how or why, maybe even, that you do start with those quotes instead of with a pile of research?

M'J: First, this is my own idea of it—human beings are really emotional creatures. We are. One thing that taps into our emotions of who we are is storytelling, and quotes are a part of storytelling, in a way. And when you start [im]pressing people by certain quotes that hook you, then you can start putting the information in bit by bit, and lightly edit it so that quote bleeds into your writing, in your data.

So that's how I do it. Because people are engaged more with quotation or some way of telling a story.

Allie: It sounds like you're using empathy within the data, like you're saying, "this is more than just raw information." There's humanity here.

M'J: It's about the heart of a person, and I think it's okay to be reasonable and logical about all things, [and] make sure you have the data and the facts. But some people, in order for them to really grasp or to understand, you have to first tap into those emotions of being human. See, because if you come to me with

⁸⁴ Tr: *empathy*. This was the name of the art exhibit being discussed.

⁸⁵ I was close, but not quite correct, as emotions and empathy are not quite the same.

core facts, I'm like, "Mm-hm. Already lost me." It's how you get people in, and sometimes quotes and storytelling is a good way of doing it.

Allie: This is a totally left field analogy, but professional massage therapists, before they start working the muscles themselves, they do a series of compressions and stuff just to get the body used to the touch and the way they're gonna manipulate the muscles. So it's exactly what you're saying. It's tapping into the human part of it and getting warmed up, almost.

M'J: You can't just come out with the fact. Like, "Here are the facts." Yeah. The facts are gonna be 100% true, but somehow a lot of people like the story first. Start with the story.
[pause] Data.

Allie: Like if you don't connect first, it's not going to sink in as much.

Ruby: What I'm hearing you say is not that this is audience specific—in the sense that you think [a] particular audience needs the story first—[but] that human audiences in a more general way need that. Am I correct in that's what you're saying?

M'J: Yeah. It's about understanding different audiences and trying, you know, engage them all at the same time. I'm trying to say [in an] interdisciplinary way.

Ruby: Right.

M'J: Because you are talking to multiple different people. They might come from different paths, who knows? If I'm saying different things—if you use a quote that everyone can know, understand, and sympathize with it or empathize with it, you can get a lot of people from various different backgrounds.

Ruby: Sometimes people will talk about, "Well, my specific audience needs this because I have to reach them." Right? And so they write, really try to tailor things. But it almost sounds like you're kind of universalizing it. You're saying "all of my audiences are human first, and so I'm gonna try to reach them as humans," and everything else comes after that.

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: That's something that's gonna definitely not just be in your technical work at your job, but also gonna be in all the other work that you do. Yeah, that's—wow. That's really fascinating.

M'J: I guess. Every person for themselves! [cackles]

Ruby: Right, yeah. Start with that.

M'J: I just think it gave us more opportunity to write our writing out as we see it. To how we create it. Like, this is who I am. This is it. Because if you try to force someone bring—to go out there, do some research and study this, [and] this, that, an' a third⁸⁶—the people would be like, "Oh, I don't really want to do it." And they're not gonna put their best foot forward, some of them.

Allie: I'm seeing that in the classroom right now. My students are writing argumentative essays, and some of them aren't really interested in their topics, but most of them are like—they had to pick from a list, and a lot

⁸⁶ *This, that, an' a third* is the eastern North Carolina version of the Black English Vernacular phrase, *this, that, and the third*, which Urban Dictionary (n.d.) defines as "the natural progression of 'This and That' (n.p.) into the territory of 'Extra.'"

of them are like, “Why am I doing this? What is the point of this?” Like let’s just argue about the topics instead of building a written argument.

And if there’s not an intrinsic motivation, right, if they’re not invested in what they’re gonna find in their research, why would they connect with it?

M’J: They’re not bringing their best selves— aspects forward.

Ruby: Right. It’s not personal, it’s not invested, it’s not authentic.

Allie: Right.

Ruby: Yeah, which is funny in and of itself, right? Not trying to make any value judgments about other people’s ideas. But if it’s not intrinsic in any way to who you are, what’s the— Other than you have to do it for a grade, right?

Allie: Right.

M’J: I agree.

Ruby: Instead of starting with, “What do you care about? Who do you want to reach? What do you want to accomplish?” And then maybe what existing [genre] form or collection of them will help you do that best. And so I’m working toward that. I’m trying to get a sense of why that would work better.

Allie: In thinking about my writing instruction, I would *love* if my students had confidence in writing down what they think. They say something and then they’re like, “But I can’t write that down.”

And I’m like, “Why? Write it. Because then we can revise it, then we can change it, then we can do whatever you want with it. But if it’s in your head, we can’t do anything with it.” I just want them to put it down on the paper or the document, but there’s so much fear instilled.

Because these are high school students. They’ve had years and years and years of being told that they’re not good writers, that they don’t do it right, that they don’t know what they’re doing. And then the second they have a thought, it’s, “well, that’s not good enough to write down. That’s not ‘right’ enough to write down.”

M’J: Just like when we went to see Dr. Love speak. You remember that little essay the kid wrote?

Allie: Yeah.

M'J: And a teacher [comments] “I am really disappointed in this.” That’s how you turn people down. That’s when they run. They give you their real thoughts, their real feelings, who they really are.

Then you as an authority figure sit there and “Oh, I’m disappointed in this,” and you start— No! They have it. It’s just not geared to what you like. It’s not formatting to what you like.

Allie: Right. Nobody thinks in APA format. Nobody’s born with this knowledge of commas. It’s a set of rules that people have created to gatekeep who gets to join a conversation.

M'J: See, and that doesn’t make sense.

Allie: And as much as we know that grammar is just a set of rules, for students who have never realized that, just like any other rules, they can be bent and they can be broken. It’s really cool to just be the person that’s like, [whispers] “Break the rules.”

Ruby: And what happens when they hear you whisper that?

Allie: Sometimes they lose their minds!

[laughter]

Allie: I recently had a senior at ECU come in [to the writing center], and she just wanted affirmation and needed to put commas where she needed commas. But I started questioning the purpose in her capstone project, and she— On my part it was not a good job of listening. It was an act of violation because I should’ve acknowledged that she was not ready for me to say, “What is your purpose in this 14 pages that you’ve brought to me today?”

She didn’t want that. I was the first set of eyes looking at her 14 pages. She needed someone to say, “This is great. What a wonderful thing this is.” And I just didn’t catch that, and I feel really bad about it.

I realized that near the end of our session and I said, “Listen, I see what I did,” and I explained what I did wrong, and she was like, “Yeah. That’s what you did.” And I was like, “All right, cool. So if you’ll give me another shot and make an appointment with me later in the week, I’ll do it better.” And she did, and it was better. So it worked out.

But [saying “Break the rules”] can be a really negative thing, right? Because those are the people who are traditionally good writers [who often come to the writing center]. They know how to write to get the grade, they know how to write to the prompt, they know how to write to the question.

SIDEBAR: **“That’s how you turn people down.”**

During the extended conversation that follows, M’J and Allie focused on the narrow standards of correctness so often associated with writing.

This part of the conversation began when M’J brought up a recent public lecture by Dr. Bettina Love that (coincidentally) all three of us had attended. In that presentation, Love had shown an image of an elementary-grade student’s writing journal, where the student had written a quite personal response to a prompt, emphasizing his family’s understanding of Columbus Day as quite different than had been presented in the classroom.

The teacher had written underneath the student’s paragraph a note that read, “I am disappointed in you.” The student’s final note back to the teacher was “Ok.”

Love, an abolitionist educator and scholar, spoke about her academic research. Her explicit critique of public education in the U.S. (Love, 2019). As the conversation continued, it was clear that Love’s lecture resonated with both of these participants—M’J as a former student and Allie as a teacher.

Ruby: Well, in some ways she was done already.

Allie: Exactly.

Ruby: Which is not the writing stage.

Allie: Yeah. But then other people, when I tell them that? I had somebody who came in and they were writing about trust and sharing of knowledge in a film review. We talked about that and she was like, “You’re right. That’s incredible.” We started restructuring her whole draft, and she was loving it.

She was having the best time because she was taking what she knows from her own experiences of trusting others and knowing background experiences and other people’s perspective, and she was able to apply it to the film that she was reviewing. So it was that intrinsic motivation. I encouraged her as opposed to saying, “What’s your purpose?” so then crashing the system.

M’J: Yeah. Trusting on you to write something. [This] ties with my little academic career. One thing I see is good because I realized the set of rules that we go by now was set by a few individuals and how they do things, and they—it’s communicate[d] to all the other individuals: “No, this is how you supposed to do it. We’re the authorities here. And you put the comma here, you do it this way. This is what we want you to do.” Instead of very inclusive to everyone.

It feels like being different cultures. I cannot do your culture, or you can’t do my culture. And there’s no right way of doing a culture. It’s just how you see it. Write what you see. Not just this one way of writing: “Oh, you gotta put a comma here, you gotta do this.” People get turned off by that.

Allie: Absolutely. And especially, what if you turn in something that is raw content-wise, like your thoughts? And you’re putting yourself out there and you’re putting that risk out there, right? Because you’re vulnerable when you put that work out there in any form.

And then you get your assessment back and it’s no response to the content at all, it’s just, “This is awkward wording, and this needs a comma, and this is this, and this is this, and this is this.”

And there’s red pen all over the place. Your ideas just got slashed to death! They’re bleeding!

M’J: First of all, you’re not supposed to write in red pen.

Allie: No red pen, ever!

M’J: No red!

SIDEBAR: GENRE FLUIDITY AS RESISTANCE

This kind of discussion was an important part of what the group conversations could do.

M’J’s academic experiences had left him feeling his writing was poor, but I believe meeting with a group member peer who had ‘English major cred’ and worked in a university writing center helped him distance himself from both the strictures of prescriptive correctness and the judgements assigned to it.

Allie and M’J were the participants who were most often able to attend the writing group meetings, and they had some other commonalities—such as being 20-somethings, having multiply-marginalized identities, and being the writers who separated grammar and writing mechanics from their understandings of what writing is.

They both strongly resisted strictures of correctness and of Standard Written English as more appropriate. They also were the two participants in the study who used the second form of genre fluidity (mixed-genre single-text), and—as I write in the final chapter—I see this alignment as quite significant.

Ruby: I wondered, because there's so much of quote-unquote "academic writing," and people are told, "Don't use the word 'I'." [As though] you have to take yourself out of it. And of course there's a lot of writing studies research that says that's a bad idea.

M'J: It is.

Ruby: I wonder how much, [when] students say and think things, but they don't want to write it down— How much of that is because "I" is supposed to be removed, because they've been taught that this kind of cold, emotionless, identity-less sort of objective way of looking at things is the only correct way to look at things.

Allie: Yeah.

M'J: Again, human beings are emotional, right?

Ruby: And cultural.

M'J: And cultural.

I do use the word "I" sometimes. I can't help it. That's part of who we are. We use "I," and it's not about ourselves. It's about how we really feel about our work, right?

Here's the thing. They want us to be robots. I cannot do it. Just like when you take a test, you gotta check this, do this. No. I cannot learn to repeat what you just said. I'm sorry, that's not who I am. This is not an input-output device. [laughs] I'm sorry, I'm a human being, okay?

Allie: I'm not a parrot. [attempts bird noise]

M'J: Polly want a cracker? No, I don't want a cracker.

[laughter]

Allie: E equals MC squared. Baaawk!

[more laughter]

M'J: That's what I think with the students. If you go to the classrooms, you'll see they got them in lines and stuff. It's funny. [Someone recently] was talking about how the school system is set up. It was set up to gear people to be civil citizens, well-maintained. You listen to the rules, don't break the rules, you're like robots. We're maintained so when you got out there in the real world, you know how to work the way they want you to work.

Allie: In cinderblock buildings for 12 hours a day.

SIDEBAR:

ON FAILURE / NOT FAILURE

As is clear from the shift in the conversation that begins on the previous page, we three were getting a bit worked up about our resistance to the restrictions and constraints of correctness and formatting we had previously experienced

This is unsurprising: all of us had, at one point or another, at least one prior experience of "failing" at writing.

Things turned silly briefly—with the comments about robots and parrots—but then the conversation took a serious turn. Once we were back to how narrow ways of teaching writing and understanding writing can be truly negative—the conversation made it clear that we know we had not failed. Rather, we had *been* failed.

M'J: That's— wow, how can somebody sit in a room, right, and they feel stuffy and it's closed in all the time?

Hell, if you can let us write outside, I'd probably perform better. That's a different environment.

Allie: Yeah.

M'J: Kids are not robots. We are not human beings. We *are* human beings, I mean. But one thing I believe is we need to separate this whole idea of allowing a few people to make all the rules, and we follow it. To me that's not right.

Allie: Yeah. I follow a lot on Twitter where a lot of people are trying to actively disrupt academia's language and not conform to those rules that are Western, white, dead men's making.

Why am I— Why is my narrative as a Chicana not interesting? Why is it not accepted in academia? Like why are my ideas considered lesser just because I don't— because I include the "I" in my research?

That's something I want to bring to the classroom, and I was reading recently about this whole idea of the I-Search research paper. So it's really, it's that student-centered research. It's what do you want to know more about? How can you do it? What can you show me about what you've learned? And what a powerful way to teach research skills. [heavy sigh]

M'J: You're right. Dead white men ways of doing it. I'm like, "You're dead, first. We don't need to follow you no more." But like you said, once you put the "I" and allow this person to express themselves and make it student-centered—and not white dead men centered, because they're not there no more—and make that person who's living now centered.

When I work with my clients, we learned that— I don't know if you heard about motivational interviewing. Allowing the client to come up with their own solution. You just follow behind them, just getting good—"Well, what are some ways you can do this?"

Allie: Yeah. Those probing, like—

M'J: Yeah. Making it positive. Making them do it.

Ruby: Instead of saying, "Here's a list of solutions for you."

M'J: Yeah. That's off-putting. And if I was a client, I'm like, "Uh, no thank you."

Allie: "This list works for 40% of people. If it fails you, it's your fault."

Ruby: So here's a question for both of you, right? We kinda talked about how we're taught writing is this and not this, and research is this and not this, and this is correct and this is not correct. And some of that has to do with genre, some of it has to do with writing in general.

How much of the way you write is pushback or specific resistance to those prescriptions, first of all, right? How much has that shaped what you write and don't write? Or how it turns out?

And the secondary piece to that is, how do you think your writing might be different if you hadn't ever been told all of those things or [been] taught or ha[d] those things pressed on you?

Allie: Well, I know for me writing was something I found and started, that I attached to because I didn't have another outlet.

When I started writing, I was a child. I was dealing with a lot of things that I didn't know how to verbalize, but I knew how to write. And so it was really personal, it was mine and it was a mix of poetry and just blocks of words and even some messy short stories and stuff.

I know that for me, my writing came from coping. So when it came to aligning that with what I was assigned to do in schools, I can remember very vividly a few— 'cause you don't start writing-writing until fourth, fifth, sixth grade, and by that point I had already been writing my own stuff, writing poetry, trying to survive with my writing.

And when I started doing those writing instruction assignments, I got a lot of discouragement. I remember in fifth grade, I presented a story I wrote that had a lot of sexual themes, because I was abused, and that's something that—that was a way that I wrote about, that I coped with it. And instead of saying, "Let's talk about the content of your paper," I was silenced and told to sit down, and I got disciplined for it.

That was the beginning of me realizing I had to separate *my* writing from the writing that was expected of me, and that was a theme for a lot of my school career until maybe eighth to ninth grade, where I had these two specific teachers who were like, "Who are you?" And they never asked me to separate those identities, ever.

That's the first time I've thought about that in a long time. Wow.

M'J: Well, my background is a little different because I was raised in the country, in the outskirts of Greenville, so we didn't really have writing utensils or books that much. My parents didn't really engage us in writing or doing book stuff. So I missed out on a lot of stuff when I was younger.

SIDEBAR:

MORE ABOUT RESISTANCE

At this point in the meeting, I explicitly asked M'J and Allie about their resistance to rules about correctness and so-called good writing. I hoped to get them to discuss how they got to the point of resistance, how they started pushing back—or indeed felt the need to do so.

The result was intensely personal, deeply moving stories that illustrate each of them coming to this resistance after being assigned a label of wrongness or failure. These are significant moments of identity formation, discussed further in the next chapter, that seem connected to genre fluidity.

As I said at this meeting, "some of th[is] has to do with genre, [and] some of it has to do with writing in general."

And they got to the point where we got to, I think, when they started doing the EOGs⁸⁷ and one of the parts was writing. You had to write on this particular thing. As a student, I didn't have the exact same resources. I didn't understand a lot of things.

So that's when they put me as, they wrote me [an] IEP⁸⁸, like a disability. It was just I didn't have the resources I needed to keep on learning what my school had, right? And that's a lot linked to a lot of students now. They don't have a lot of resources and stuff like that. Their homes have no computers and stuff. But they have more than what I had.

When we was taking my first EOG writing, they asked us, "What is a role model? Write about role model." Stuff like that. To me, the only thing I thought about was a model. A fashion model. A person who takes pictures, that kind of model. So from there, I just didn't understand what they were really asking. Because role model, *model*.

Ruby: Because that was not a term that you were familiar with.

M'J: No. Not at all.

Allie: Wow.

M'J: So I wrote about models and how they walk up and down the things and stuff like that. I was a little confused while I was writing, like, "What? I don't get it." So I was writing still, and I failed.

Allie: Right. You wrote something, and you "failed."

M'J: Of course I failed. I wrote something, though!

Ruby: But you still— It was considered "failing."

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: It's not that you didn't have role models, but that that's not what they were called.

M'J: Yeah. When we use the term "model," it's not like that.

Ruby: Right.

M'J: Like magazine books, you see models in there. That's what I thought they were talking about. When I heard "role model," I didn't know what the role model is, so I just talk about the model.

Allie: What a genius problem-solving thing for a child to do, though! You were like, "Well, I don't know all the words, but I know this, so I'm gonna write about that."

Ruby: Right.

M'J: Right. And I failed.

⁸⁷ EOG refers to End of Grade standardized testing that public schools in North Carolina use.

⁸⁸ IEP is education system-shorthand for Individualized Education Plan.

Ruby: It's really— Talk about, different cultures use different languages, and use language different ways! It wasn't that you didn't come from a place where you had leaders and where you had examples of what adults should be like, or any ideas about what— because role models are the people you should aspire to be.

M'J: And they didn't communicate that to me.

Ruby: Right. Right. The term, but it wasn't like you had a kind of life that there weren't people you aspired to be.

M'J: Yeah.

Ruby: Or who showed you what leadership or what adulting looked like or whatever, or success looked like. It's just they weren't labeled in that way. So because you didn't have that word— wow.

M'J: Yeah. And actually, this is the first time I shared it with anyone.

Ruby: And that that was considered failing. Not because you weren't writing sentences, I'm assuming, if the test was supposed to be about putting sentences in logical paragraphs together. I'm sure you did that. But it was off topic or something, and that was considered failing.

M'J: Yeah.

Allie: That's wild.

Ruby: Yeah. So they were more interested in you following their prompt than they were with you actually writing.

M'J: The prompt.

Allie: That's testing!

M'J: That's testing for you.

Ruby: Right.

M'J: You follow the prompt. It's not what you're— The skills are there. All the students have these skills. They have the writing skills.

Ruby: Yes.

M'J: They just express it different. Or you know, not expressing it to the way you like it.

Allie: Especially the students now, right? They do have phones. They're writing every day.

Ruby: And they're reading, too. They just don't know it's reading, either.

Allie: Right.

Ruby: Because they don't call it that.

Allie: Yeah.

M'J: Yeah, they think reading is through pages of books.

Ruby: I know. I hear that all the time.

M'J: They always connect [reading] to books.

Ruby: “I haven’t read a book in five years,” they’ll say, or “I haven’t read a book since they made me read one in high school, and I didn’t read half of those either.” And, [they] read every day.

Allie: Yeah.

M'J: You read a post about your friend going to the bar, that’s reading.

Ruby: And you write a response, too.

M'J: And you write a response.

Ruby: Probably with words as well as emojis. You’re using language. You might not have a period at the end, of course, because we don’t do that. But it’s still writing. It’s still reading.

Allie: Yeah, that’s wild.

M'J: Yeah, so it’s a major disconnect in a lot of ways.

Allie: Yeah. A few of my students, for their topics, for those argument papers, are writing ‘technology makes us more alone.’ And I’m like, “Well, is that your opinion, or is that just the topic you picked off the list?” And they’ll be, “Yeah, I guess so.” And then as they’re saying that, they’ll check their Snapchat or Instagram, and I’m like, “That’s not what you think.” But I can’t tell them that.

Ruby: Can you take the other position? Can you disagree with one of the topic choices?

Allie: But they want to pick that one because that’s what’s (a.), on the paper, so they feel like that’s the right answer. And (b.), they feel, based on what all the adults in their life tell them about their phones and stuff, that’s gonna be easier to argue. That’s what I’ve gathered.

Ruby: They’ve heard all th[ose] arguments, that’s why.

Allie: Yeah.

Ruby: They haven’t made them, but they’ve heard them. Wow. Yeah.

Allie: What a world.

Ruby: Yeah.

M'J: Just through writing.

Ruby: Right. How connected it is to so many other things, right? Which is part of what I wanted us to talk about, so I’m excited about that. Thank you so much for participating in this conversation and for allowing me to record it. I’m gonna stop the recording now.

This next transcript is from a writing group meeting⁸⁹ where almost everyone who participated in the project (Allie, M’J, J, and I) was able to attend. Among other topics that arose that day, we talked about writing genre forms, skill toolkits for writers, and writing skills transfer. There was also a story about resistance to grant-writing conventions and an extended passage where metaphors for writing proved to be both entertaining and insightful.

At the start of the meeting, J had not yet arrived, so the conversation began with the rest of us, and then she joined in as soon as she arrived. After a brief conversation about upcoming travel plans, the official conversation began. There was also a part of the meeting where M’J stepped out to take a phone call. As was often the case, Allie and I began the conversation, and M’J listened for a while before contributing. The robust discussion in this meeting was what I envisioned when I began this project, and my analysis of this thoughtful conversation added depth to my overall findings.

TRANSCRIPT 2: ALLIE, M’J, J, & RUBY

Ruby: Today we are talking about genres. In particular, I want to introduce a topic of what happens when you are faced with writing a new genre form and somebody says, “You need to write one of these,” or you discover that you need to write something and you’ve never written it before. We’re gonna talk a little bit about what you do in that situation? How do you figure out what to do?

Allie: I recently had to write an anthology, [to] curate up to ten poems of other people’s work and put it together and write an introduction, for the end of my poetry class. I was really excited because I’ve read and owned a lot of anthologies and leaf through them, but I’ve never actually had to put one together, write an introduction, and turn it in for assessment.

I was really excited about working on it and I started early. That [is] one thing I like to do when I don’t know the genre. I get excited about it, so I just kind of dive in as soon as possible. It took a lot of—a longer revision than I expected. After I put those [ten poems] together, I tried to figure out the themes that connect them. I printed out my first version and did a lot of revision and freewriting, and then eventually moved towards getting an introduction done. It was a really fun experiment, but also nerve-wracking because it wasn’t something I had done before.

Ruby: You said you read a lot of them before, so you had some familiarity from having been a reader, not a writer. Did you decide to go back and look at any?

Allie: Yeah. I have a few favorites. There’s *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* that I don’t have the copy of anymore because I lost. I’m still heartbroken about it. I keep wanting to buy a new copy, but it’s 20 bucks.

⁸⁹ December 2018.

I went to—you know on Amazon you can do [a] preview and just look inside of it? I looked at the introduction because that's the part that I had to write, obviously. The rest was just collecting it and curating it and putting it in an order that I wanted, but I looked over the introduction from that. I looked up a couple of the Norton anthologies I have. I definitely made use of mentor texts.

Ruby: Is that pretty typical for you, or is that just this particular assignment that you did that way?

Allie: I don't run into a lot of genres that I hadn't had some experience writing. But when I do, I would say that's pretty typical of me. I'm trying to think about another thing that I've written lately that was like, "Oh, I've never done this before." I'm [a] senior in the education program, so it's a lot. I did just have to write a unit plan, which was—

I've done the parts of [a unit plan] before, but I've never put it all together, and that was something that was like, "Pull my hair out." Frustrating and tough, but really great. I did a fantastic job with it. And I didn't have a mentor text, really, to use, so I had to do a lot of beating my own path, and then checking with the instructor and collaborating with peers and saying, "Hey, what are you doing for this? Here's what I'm doing."

Ruby: Did what you were trying to do originally turn out to be exactly what that genre typically looks like?

Allie: Yeah.

Ruby: So, we were having a conversation about that—last week? A little bit about how the kind of sophistication that it really takes to just go in and do something because you maybe—unconsciously almost—[are] trying to pick apart what you're actually [doing]. That's the hard thing here, because you all are good at this.

To think about, how do you get to the point where you somehow intuit exactly what it's supposed to look like? What the form is supposed to be? Not just who the audience is, not just what the purpose is—but how that translates into form, and then you just kinda do it.

Allie: The way [that assignment] works is that you have a template for the unit plan because you need to populate a certain number of days of instruction plan and then a few days of lesson plans and then materials and stuff like that. I had this overall template, but I—in terms of it looking like it's supposed to, it actually looked even more like it's supposed to than I realized.

SIDEBAR:

NEW GENRE FORMS

Based on her description of these two instances where she needed to produce genre formats she had never written before, it was clear that Allie's ability to move into closely-adjacent and moderate-adjacent has been well-developed. As a college senior majoring in English and English education—who also was a university writing center consultant and a youth educator—she had many resources to draw on.

These new genre forms were in English studies and in education, so were in her disciplinary and professional homes. For the anthology assignment, she first did free-writing to produce a genre-fluid draft, and then she accessed mentor texts to edit her work into an introduction to a selected anthology. For her first full unit plan, she had a blank template but did not have a mentor text to examine as she was drafting.

Allie had experience, training, and personal and professional networks to equip her for these two new genre tasks—along with, in one case, excitement for the challenge—which all contributed to her ease in completing the new genre tasks. I continued the conversation by asking about a genre format she had virtually no familiarity with.

Because when I got my feedback, it was, “This is exactly what you’re going to need to do next semester.” And I’m like, “Awesome! What a leg up! I know what I need to do for that because I need to do that for my licensure.”

Ruby: Let’s say for your job you had to write a grant. Have you written grants before?

Allie: I have not written grants.

Ruby: What would you do [if you needed to write a grant]?

Allie: I would definitely do a ton of research. I would talk to people and then I’d probably do some freewriting or drafting, just reflecting on what I want, how to get it, who I need to contact and get it from. I would kind of plan it, I think, in my own way, and then try to dive in using those resources that I determine in helping with my process.

Ruby: You say you research and talk to people. What kind of research and what kind of people?

Allie: Probably a preliminary Google search. Start there, see where it takes me. Move into maybe the Joyner [library] databases and look for scholarly articles on it. And move forward in that sense, and then probably connect with either—because I’ve worked with a lot of writers.

The Writing Center has been doing some grant stuff, so I’ll probably talk to some of the other writing consultants that I work with—maybe some professors. Definitely in the English department because I have great relationships with them and I feel like they probably have more expertise with the grants. And then I guess I would just see where that takes me.

Ruby: What about you, M’J? [If] you had to write a grant, what would you do?

M’J: The exact same thing.

Ruby: [cackles] Okay. So what do you do now? Part of an earlier conversation that we had, you decided to write a—forget what it was now.

M’J: It was a proposal.

Ruby: Project proposal, and you just kind of wrote one without going and reading project proposals to see what they look like, or even to see what the content was, much less the form. You just kind of did it. Can you try to think about how that happened?

SIDEBAR: RESISTANCE & SUCCESS

In this next part of the discussion, M’J outlined his experiences writing a project proposal for funding.

We talked about his resistance to the format he was asked to use for the proposal, and about what he did instead. As previously noted, M’J strongly resisted directives about grammar as well as genre conventions—which, as I discuss further in Chapter 7—correlates with being a writer who uses both strategies of genre fluidity.

His resistance was on full display in this conversation, and he also told us about his success in getting the project funded.

M'J: They just sent us questions to answer and each question is a paragraph long. And they [ask] what your project is about, how you're gonna get there, what audience you're trying to grasp, what the target audience is, how long it will be to start planning it and give them a more detailed plan.

I didn't give them a plan. I just gave them phases of where I wanna be, because my thing is not set in stone. I might be more flexible because it would evolve. It would change. Some things that you want to do doesn't originate with your plan, and you wanna do something much bigger and better than what you [originally] intended to do.

So that's what the proposal was all about. But they just sent us some questions and stuff and I just went through the questions.

Ruby: So you kinda had a template—at least a template of content if not form.

M'J: Yeah, it was—don't tell them that, but it was poor. It was—

Ruby: The way the questions are worded and all that kind of—?

M'J: Because some of the questions—if I can remember right, some questions before the last question was the exact same, just rewritten. And I'm like, "What people are you gonna bring into your project? Can you give a list of the people you're gonna bring into your project?" I just did that right here.

Ruby: So did you resist the form that they gave you or did you stick with it?

M'J: Guess what? They loved it! Sometimes you just gotta take a risk!

[laughter]

Ruby: So you answered all their questions, but not necessarily separately [or] in the order they were. So you started with the template, but you didn't stick to it.

M'J: Yeah. And one part, where it asked about the people—giving some of the list of people you work with or organizations you were working with, in the exact same— The next question is something like that. "Refer to the paragraph ahead."

Ruby: Oh, so you did that. You didn't just ignore it.

M'J: I'm not gonna [write] a whole 'nother paragraph, because everything I have was literally in those other paragraphs. They just had to look for it. Matter of fact, they didn't even have to go far. It was right there. The questions they asked were just poor.

Ruby: What is it about M'J that makes him so sure that he can just ignore their directions and be effective? Other than just M'J is fabulous? We know that!

[laughter]

M'J: I'm not fabulous!

[more laughter]

Ruby: But I think that that's not what most people would do.

M'J: A lot of people would not do that.

Allie: People get paralyzed when it comes to decisions like that.

Ruby: Right. So what made it possible for you? I'm trying to re-engineer this, right? What was going through your head and what made it possible for you to just kind of ignore that in favor of what you thought was more effective? Or what you thought was better in some way than what they were trying to make you do?

M'J: So I'm hearing you say, what made me do the totally opposite of what they wanted me to do to present my project?

Ruby: Right. Because that's kind of busting the template. Template-busting or something like that.

M'J: To me, I didn't really follow the rules. It's just, "Refer to the paragraph I had," because I already used the exact same answer. I feel like I'm replicating everything that I just said, and I don't really like that.

Allie: Do you feel like you would've been confident in making those editorial decisions three years or a year ago? Because you graduated. As an undergrad, do you think you would've been like, "I can make whatever changes I want. Screw you, rules!"?

M'J: No, because you was getting graded!

[laughter]

Ruby: But isn't getting funded or not funded, or getting approval or not, still a form of grading?

M'J: It is, but in the circumstances we're in, the organization that I've gotten into, they were more free and more open. Matter of fact, when I proposed it—when I sent it to them the day before, I had to go to Greensboro [NC] and meet them then. They [read] my proposal with[out saying], "You didn't follow this right." I did take a risk. So, I'm trying to say, in writing, sometimes you have to take risks. Sometimes it's individuals—they want you to do it how they want, because it gives them a sense of power and authority in a way.

Ruby: But I think Allie's right. A lot of people would be frozen by that.

M'J: A lot of people would, but—

Ruby: But not M'— Well, I'm wondering how situational that is. But it *is* M'J, though!

SIDEBAR: RISK ASSESSMENT

As we found out, the organization that funded M'J's proposal had informally approved his project already, so his first attempt at writing a funding proposal was in fact a cushioned leap.

He fully expected to get the project funded, based on an informal conversation before he wrote the proposal, so he saw this resistance as a low-risk act.

However, the fact that the process required a formal proposal and a formal approval may mean that the funding was not as pre-assured as he believed it to be. In any case, he resisted the format provided to him and he got the funds.

SIDEBAR: RELATIONSHIPS

M'J's genre-fluid approach, which he went on to describe as a good fit for the organization based on what he already knew, worked in this instance.

As Allie pointed out, M'J viewed this writing task as a relational one, where he felt he was in tune with the readers of the proposal. His success (including his resistance), it seems, was not a function of beginner's luck. Instead, it was in part based on a sophisticated reading of his audience.

That ability to connect with people within his audience—one of M'J's go-to moves—was instrumental in his successful use of a genre-fluid strategy.

M'J: It's situational.

Ruby: Because you said, before, things were being graded. And in this case, you've already been funded. You were just getting a check-off, approval on a project. If the proposal were what you were writing and then they would be deciding whether or not to fund you based on that—

M'J: I already had it before I even did a proposal.

Ruby: If you had not, would that have changed your willingness to ignore their prescriptions about how the proposal should be written?

M'J: If they ask the exact same questions like that, I would still do what I had done.

Ruby: Even if you were afraid that might mean you wouldn't get the money?

M'J: No. Now, if they asked me, "Mr. [MySurname], could you please explain why you did it this way," I would tell them why. Your questions were replicated. The exact same question I answered with one paragraph, you want me to answer again, and it doesn't seem like—

My thing is, in order for you to get me to do something perfect, exactly what it is, please present me questions that does not relate to one another. Don't say, "Well..." If I had the questions right with me, I would read y'all the questions. Matter of fact, I'm trying to look for them.

Ruby: Okay. I mean, I believe you, I'm just saying—

M'J: Oh no, no. But see, because in order for me to say it how I'm supposed to say it, I have to look at the questions.

Allie: It sounds like you look at it like a conversation like a relationship. You know your audience in this context and things like that and that gives you maybe—if we're still comparing it to instructor assessment—a little bit more power in that relationship as in this current context, whereas an instructor's always gonna have the power in that relationship.

M'J: Yeah, because when I was in school, I had to do it as a student, in order to get the grade. Because me, I always present— For me, to show people that I can do things even better. And I got the grades I did because I followed the instructions right. But it was dealing with grades and I'm a person that's really big on trying—

Ruby: I'm just thinking if you were trying to get funding, and you got this template that you think is a bad template, you just can ignore the template and do it the way you think is right.

M'J: Pretty much.

Ruby: So what is it about you or your writing that makes you willing—or able, maybe, is a better word—to do that?

M'J: They first ask[ed for a] project overview, right? And I gave them three paragraphs. Then the next thing is the "problem," and I give them a paragraph and a half. Then the next question was, "Who has the power to give it to you?"

Allie: Give?

M'J: Exactly. So that's poor. What do you mean, who has the—? You know what I responded to that with?

Allie: *You* have the power.

M'J: I said, "Myself!" [laughs] And then I gave in and said "other people." See, I told you. Bad question writing. What does that mean? Then the next question—remember [earlier it was] "Who has the power to give it to you?"—says, "Who are your current coalition partners?" Do you mean partners as a group or individuals? So, I just gave them a list of people an' partners.

Allie: Do you think a big part of your ability to navigate that is because you said they're freer and a little bit more flexible? Do you think that plays into it? You know that they trust you to make those decisions?

M'J: Yeah. Matter of fact, in a way, the reason why they gave us more autonomy for this is to see, will we take leadership positions and take charge of some things? And I'm like, you're asking me about my project and I'm giving you everything that you want to hear, and in my way!

Ruby: So, it's ownership of the project as well as the text.

M'J: Yeah. When I was in school, I didn't have that autonomy. I had to give it. And it was for a grade. I'm a person who loves to perform academically high. And that's me. I try to do the best I can when it comes down to grades because I want that A. And maybe even A+ if they provide an A+.

[J arrives at the meeting]

Ruby: J, we are recording, just so you know. And today we're talking about what happens when you need to, or have been asked to, write in a genre form that you haven't used before. What do you do and what is your process?

M'J's talking about grant writing. I started earlier when Allie was talking about her experiences, and I asked if she—

J: I have an illustration for you. This actually something that happened to me before [I started a library studies degree program]. I decided to get involved with library life and to find out more about what goes on behind the scenes.

I presented [my first conference] paper [at a conference for library paraprofessionals] in a way you would present at an English conference, where you stand at the podium or whatever and you read from your work. Granted, I didn't read the entire 15-page paper. I ended up reading maybe a fifth of it, just a portion of it. But I realized—as I saw other people presenting, I made some major boo-boos.

I had not presented as a librarian would. I presented it as an English instructor would. Librarian after librarian, what they did was read some of their introduction or an abstract and then they presented the rest [using] PowerPoint...and that's how we got a sense of the rest of their work.

So I realized, "Okay, you did some things that librarians are not used to and because of that, they may not have gotten an understanding or appreciation of your work they might have otherwise."

Ruby: Is this your first conference paper?

J: Yes, that was. In addition to it being a style of conference I'd never been to, I'd never presented a conference paper in my life. I didn't get involved in English or literature in a way that I had, and still am, in librarianship. I never got that committed to the point where I attended conferences or presented papers or anything like that.

I wasn't that passionate about it. I learned over and over again this past semester—there is an enormous difference between an interest and a passion. I was interested in English, writing, literature, being an English instructor, tutor, what have you. I was very interested in that. But I wasn't passionate about it. I got passionate about librarianship and that was what led me to decide to present, even before I got into the [library science grad] program.

Ruby: This would've been your first conference abstract you ever wrote, too? How did you figure out what a conference abstract—? Because you would've heard [of] conference papers, at least heard people—

J: I realized what I was doing wrong, but then I also realized just watching—because a lot of these librarians who were presenters at the conference, they'd been involved in the field for years. They've presented at conferences before. They've submitted articles and scholarly publications. They had all this experience that I don't.

I not only realized what I was doing wrong, but I also realized what they were doing right. So they were teaching me, "This is the right way that you present because this is the style that we use. Our style is very different from what you've seen and what you've heard of."

Ruby: Right, but backing up to that abstract, how did you figure out what the abstract was supposed to look like or what the abstract was supposed to contain? Can you think back to your process writing the abstract?

J: When I say the word "abstract"—and I found out later on, because I got a chance to see one of the librarians' papers in addition to the presentation. He let me read it. What he did was he read the introduction, about a page and a half. And then the rest of the paper was presented in the PowerPoint. His work was a lot more engaging.

Ruby: But I'm trying to think about that writing process and how you—libraries, they might call it a proposal, not an abstract. But whatever you submitted in the first place to get them to choose your paper—how did you write that thing?

J: Okay, this is what I did later on. I was starting to learn my lesson. I found out about a conference called Console-ing Passions. I [wrote] a proposal; they accepted it. I finished the paper; they accepted it. They actually put me on the schedule. I was supposed to present at this conference. Because of work-related conflict, I ended up not doing it...but I will consider it an honor because at least I had been chosen.

SIDEBAR: NETWORKS

Like Allie, J had a significant network of colleagues within her discipline and profession, and that network functioned alongside the use of model texts to bolster her success with new adjacent genre formats.

She identified conversations with other writers and the use of model texts as the ways she would approach a new genre task that lacked adjacency to more familiar genre forms.

Ruby: But you had to write an abstract for that, too. I'm trying to dig back to—

J: Okay, I'm getting to all that.

Ruby: How did you figure out how to write an abstract?

J: At that point, I had seen some more conference papers, I got an even better sense of what to look for. I got one of the librarians to look at my paper. I thought—because they've got the experience that I don't—I will let them have at it, provide their bird's eye view and help me align my work with the expectations so when I do present again, I will have already gotten that insider's glimpse and the insider's tips—

Allie: When you had someone look over it, did they give you suggested feedback—?

J: Oh yes, oh yeah. Well, and I knew that she was—

Allie: So, what did that look like? What changes did you find that you had to make?

J: At that point, I had looked at some presentations I found online. Because I saw those models, I got an even better sense of what to do, and what they will be expecting. So, it was a combination of her wise and seasoned feedback and following the models I'd seen.

Ruby: So, if somebody asked you to write a newspaper editorial column—is that something you have written before?

J: No.

Ruby: What would you do?

J: I've gained so much from a combination of reaching out to experienced professionals immersed in the field and looking at models—because those tools are working so far, I could see myself using them again.

Ruby: So, the one thing all three of you have in common, as far as this topic goes, is conversation with people. The one thing, the thread I see and I hear in all three, is the talking to other people about your work—people trying to do [or] who have done the same thing you're doing, who are involved in the work you do and the project you are writing about. It's about those conversations with other people.

That's really interesting that the one thing—even without everybody hearing the whole conversation, we still have this thread that runs through. Whether it's a genre form you've encountered before or one that's brand new, you're having conversations with other people as a way to make it happen. Is what I'm saying coming out right?

Allie: I think so. I think that's accurate.

Ruby: Okay, okay. What other kind of genre forms can I throw at you that you have not written before?

M'J: Well, there was one that I have written before, but it was so long ago that I forgot. It's like a argumentative—

Allie: Essay?

M'J: —essay paper. And it's been so long.

Allie: I would say that it's a little bit like the whole riding a bike idea. You might not remember the exact rules of the form, but you do remember, "Okay, my purpose is to argue. My message is this is what I'm arguing and I know who my audience is." So even though you didn't have that literal structure, you still had that mental mapping where you're like, "I know how to get my point across."

J: Like tools in a toolbox. I discovered that no matter what genre you're writing in, there are basic tools that are going to be used and they're gonna be applied no matter what. You're always gonna ask yourself the same questions: "What is my topic? What is my purpose or purposes? Who are my audiences? Is it general? Am I aiming for someone specific?"

You're always gonna have the premise, and then you're gonna back it up with evidence. Those are other tools I've seen use[d] no matter what.

Ruby: Most people never write essays outside of a classroom or an academic environment, but— There are all kinds of arguments, right? For all kinds of things. You should buy this product. You should vote for this candidate. You should never do this again. You should not put this plastic bag over your head. You should eat more of this and less of that.

The metaphor of portable skills or skill set or toolkit, that kind of stuff, is apt.

J: Even the descriptive [essay]. Even the personal narrative, that's argument because you're trying to convince your audience [of] your perception of this event, [writing that] this experience is valid or this is what happened or this is what makes my experience unique or this is what makes my experience have something in common with your experience. You're gonna look at that, you're like, that's an argument as well, but then you're presenting the case and then you're backing it up with evidence.

Ruby: So, Allie, what is in your toolkit as a writer? Or your skillset?

M'J: [whispers] Toooooool kits, heh heh heh.

SIDEBAR:

FIRST, A TANGENT

As this point in the conversation continued, M'J began to speak about his experiences with first-year college writing and the argument essay—as another example of a new genre format encounter.

We moved in a different direction for a while, including discussing the "toolkits" that writers develop and carry with them into new genre tasks. This toolkit metaphor illuminated the way these writers approach a range of writing tasks. And eventually this conversation returned to the argument essay and to other analogies and metaphors that illustrate how we understand writing.

After the toolkit discussion—and a phone call—we did come back to his time in first-year writing.

Allie: Lots of reflection. Lots of reading. I think working with writers on different levels have helped me solidify my process of asking those questions, saying, “Okay. What am I doing here? How am I achieving that purpose?” My revision skills have been growing a lot in the last couple of years. Gosh, I'm just really in love with it. I've been doing a lot of revising this past week. It's very exciting work.

I feel I've really gotten to a point where I can apply that process, following that path to different genres and even things that aren't immediately familiar to me. And I also have this understanding that no matter how good my writing is [as] a product, it can always be improved and it can always be stronger and it's just a really exciting place to be.

Ruby: So, it sounds like research, analysis, revision are a big part of what you consider your toolkit. What's in your toolkit, M'J?

M'J: I don't have a toolkit.

Ruby: Skillset?

M'J: You know— [his phone ringtone starts]

Ruby: Other than your phone?

M'J: I have to take this call. I'm sorry.

Ruby: I'm still gonna ask you when you get back. So, J, what's in your toolkit?

[M'J steps out to take a call]

J: One of the tools I've added to my toolbox this semester are the databases in the library. Up until then, I had been relying largely upon Google Scholar. If you're careful, you can find essays and scholarly works and peer-reviewed works.

But it always helps to have another resource that a lot of individuals in the field might consider more legitimate. So that's gonna be incredibly helpful because a lot of articles I was able to find through JSTOR I did not find in Google Scholar, so it's definitely opened up that availability even more.

Ruby: So you're starting with JSTOR, stuff like that. How does that feed into your skill set and your toolkit as a writer? What are you doing when you go to those databases? What are you going there for? You said articles, but are you looking for models? Are you looking for data? Are you looking for—?

J: One of the other things I've been doing an awful lot this semester is looking for articles and books, mostly in the library, about certain topics [I'm] very passionate about. I plan to present a paper for next year's paraprofessional conference and we'll be discussing [the] library as a third place or an example of a living and learning community.

I'll use that in illustration. So here I am, looking for the articles, looking for books. I started with Google Scholar, then extended myself to getting more involved with databases. And then I started browsing the shelves. I've been able to just browse the shelves and move through the indexes and the table of contents. And I've been able to find a lot.

Allie: When I try to do that, I get so distracted by the books that are around. I need to use the catalog. [Or] I'll end up with a stack of books and I'm like, “I'm never gonna read all of these!”

J: Maybe that's one of the reasons why it's successful for me. I already have a specific topic that I'm looking for. I got passionate about one [topic] I didn't intend. I had gone there looking for more information about scholarly communications and stumbled across a book that had a chapter about digital archiving. That lit a fire. That lit a spark. I ended up looking for information [about] that. I had gone through the stacks with the intent [of] focusing on scholarly communications. I still ended up getting a lot of information about that, but...I saw the [digital archiving] title and I got intrigued.

Ruby: [to J] Part of your toolkit is research. I would never describe that as part of my toolkit because [then] I'm gonna end up with so many other things. I'm gonna go on some tangent. Not that I don't do research, but I would [not] consider that part of my toolkit, because I'm not sure I always wield it effectively—

Allie: I get so distracted.

Ruby: —going in so many different directions.

J: A week later, the position opened up at the library, a graduate assistant position in [the] North Carolina collections archives. So, there I was! This spark had been lit about archives and special collections and manuscripts and then this opportunity opened up. That's actually what I did the last couple weeks of the semester. I used quite a bit of that time to find out more about that topic and to build upon the foundation.

Allie: It sounds like research is a huge part of your process.

J: Right. I can definitely say that a lot of the research I've done this semester relating to librarianship 's been for personal enrichment to feed that fire. More academic librarianship, that's the area that I'm particularly going into. But a lot of the information that I've used has gone into professional development too.

Allie: So that's a lot of the research. Do you find yourself applying it to writing? What are you doing with the information? Are you summarizing it?

J: A lot of the discoveries I make—if it's something really intriguing or that I really think I'll use later on in my career—I end up writing about it in a journal entry. It ends up being filtered into professional development, but here it is also getting planted in my personal development.

Allie: What kind of writing is that? Is it reflective? Is it synthesizing ideas? Is it original?

[M'] returns to the meeting]

J: Well, it's mostly reflection. A lot of my journaling lately has been devoted towards envisioning what I will do or what I intend to do or what I plan to do. How do I plan on using all this knowledge that I'm gaining? Well yes, I'm gonna use it for personal development because of the topic that I love and I love sharing information to others, but also about using it towards developing professionally. Now the student and later on when I get into my career.

Ruby: Okay, M'. What's in your writer's toolkit?

M': [pauses] Ummmm. [whispers] Great question.

Ruby: Prevarication?

M': When you say writer toolkit, what do you mean? Some of the skills I have or—

Ruby: Yeah. So when you come to a new project, which we were talking about earlier, what do you bring with you that lets you know how to navigate that project?

J: To help you develop a project?

Ruby: Sometimes when people who have been writing essays for school go into a job, they're then told to write an executive summary about a topic or they have to write a business plan or they have to write something that's not an academic essay. To them, it feels like they're learning how to write all over again as opposed to feeling like they have portable skills they can take into that place.

What do you take with you—from the kinds of writing you've done before—into writing projects where it's not familiar? One thing we know all of you have in your toolkit is having conversations with other people about what you're writing. But what else do you—

M'J: Yeah, because when you're writing in a school format, it's different than writing in the real world. So for an insight, I will figure out—how can this relate to my life now or my job now?

Allie: Would it be fair to say that makes all writing meaningful and authentic to you?

M'J: Yeah.

Allie: Would that be like a skill that you do? Like, authentic?

M'J: That.

Ruby: So even when you were a student. When you get an assignment, you're trying to make connections? And that assignment, to something you care about, trying to make an assignment personal rather than, “Oh, I have to do one of these now,” or whatever you've done before into writing projects where it's not familiar?

M'J: Yeah, it's really hard because in school, we're taught not to use the word “I” at all. But when you get to the real world, then it's, “Well, can I use the word ‘I’ in my life?” And I'm, “Yeah, you can.” I'm like, “It's kinda hard for me to break that.”

Allie: I remember I would turn on the academic avoidance of “I” when I try to deflect in regular conversation too. A year and a half ago, Mike and I were talking about—my fiancé and I were talking about marriage before we got engaged. He was like, “So what do you think about marriage now?” And I swapped into that academic thing. I was like, [adopting stentorian tones] “Marriage is an institution...”

[prolonged laughter]

M'J: I know, exactly!

Allie: I didn't do any "I" phrase. I talked about the past of it. And he was like, "Okay, well, what do you think of it?" And I was like, "I?"

[more laughter]

Ruby: You know, that sounds like the most hilarious response to a proposal ever!

Allie: Yeah, it was funny.

J: That's funny.

Allie: But we did break down some walls and that was when we decided that I was gonna be the one who did the proposal. It was a whole thing.

Ruby: Aww, how cute.

Allie: It's so cute. I took pictures. So, when I did the proposal, I'm like, I'm gonna just take a risk and put "I" in there.

Ruby: Well, you're the proposer if you're writing a proposal, right?

Allie: Yeah, but still, there's some places—

Ruby: So, one of your skill sets is resisting all—well, resistance, first of all—we know this—[to] doing what you've been told. That's coming through loud and clear.

One of the things you have in your skill set is that ability to do that. That automatic rejection of anything that isn't personal or isn't authentic to you. So, even if it's something you're being made to do, the first thing that you do in your process is try to connect that to who you are as a person. That's what I'm hearing.

M'J: Yeah.

But the argument paper [in my first college writing class] was about interracial marriages⁹⁰. And I got the one that says, "*For* Interracial Marriages." And I'm like, "I'm actually *am* for interracial marriages."

Ruby: Oh, so you had a chance to pick a topic. You picked a topic that you cared about.

SIDEBAR: CLARIFICATION & RELEVANCE

M'J said he had found one aspect of "school format" quite helpful in his professional writing; the practice of asking for a lot of clarification—which he said benefited him greatly while a student—is something he said he uses for every writing task.

M'J also said insight about how each writing task is personally relevant has helped him be a more effective writer, citing authenticity as central for him to communicate well. For him, being authentic as a writer came back to using "I" in his work.

SIDEBAR: BACK TO FIRST-YEAR WRITING

This is the point where M'J returned us to the topic of his first encounter with the argument essay genre format.

He threaded together his emphasis on authenticity and making connections with yet another critique of writing pedagogy as hindering rather than helping writers¹.

⁹⁰ I just have to throw some side-eye at this particular assignment, since—in the more than 25 years since I had it in undergrad, and almost twice that long since *Loving v. Virginia*—this pro/con "argument" assignment has only slightly changed: from "interracial" dating to "interracial" marriage!

M'J: Well, I didn't. [The instructor] just passed out papers to each, and you have to do it. And my friend [who] was *in* an interracial relationship at the time, she had to argue *against* interracial marriages.

Allie: Jesus!

Ruby: Oh, you were *assigned* a position and a topic.

M'J: And I thought, "Well, how can I relate this to me in a sense?"

Allie: How did she make that relate to her? Like, gosh!

M'J: It was so hard for her.

Ruby: She may not have. I mean, I don't know that that's an expectation—

Allie: That's unfair.

Ruby: —for assignments that people are expected to bring their own— You know the typical academic stance—

J: I told you that I— anyway.

Ruby: —is to be impersonal and not be too— because that's not—

J: You wanna be objective.

Ruby: Right.

M'J: But in the midst of these experiences I had with writing, I figured out I can't actually be the devil's advocate and present arguments against something that I fall with.

[For another assignment] I had to think about some arguments for Christianity, even though I'm not a Christian. I had to present the argument of why people believe it and why they are so passionately devout to the religion itself. Even though I do not share their experience anymore, I had to dig deep in my oldest experiences as a Christian to speak about it.

Even though I don't have that same position now, I still have some of the experience of my life where I can connect with.

Allie: Sounds like reflection is a big tool for you, too.

M'J: Definitely reflection.

SIDEBAR: CONNECTIONS

As M'J notes here, his inability (or refusal?) to write inauthentically means he always must connect his identity—his individual self or his experiences—to his writing work.

In this case, the fact that he was only able to write a paper in support of Christianity as a faith tradition because he had been in that tradition as a child (before he converted to Islam) clearly suggests that he is able to shift to new writing genre formats only when he can connect them to who he already is in some way.

Ruby: It sounds like [being a devil's advocate is] more about the ability to be obnoxious than it is the ability to be objective, right? A way of saying, "Hold up, let me poke some holes in what you're doing."

M'J: Well, the difference is showing that you can argue from both sides. It's not necessarily that I can do it now.

Allie: Well, if we're talking about the purpose of playing devil's advocate—assigning people to argue for something they're against—it's so they build those skills that are transferrable because they're not connected to, "Well, this is what I believe, so obviously I can argue for it." It's much harder to argue for something you don't believe in.

Allie: We're taught to hide a lot of [writing] work. We're taught to be like ducks. Seemingly graceful, but underneath—

Ruby: I think writing is like that sometimes. You're supposed to look—it's supposed to look beautiful, but—

Allie: Effortless.

Ruby: —you make it look effortless. It's like a photo shoot. Eight hours in a chair, you make beauty look effortless!

J: I've also viewed writing like an iceberg. I mean, you see the tip of it and it looks graceful, but you look beneath the surface and [see] all that turbulence and that destructive power. And everything that led to your final draft. That's beneath the surface.

Ruby: [M'J], what's your metaphor for writing? We've got ducks and icebergs.

M'J: Both of them.

Allie: I guess you can see once you get the end of the iceberg.

SIDEBAR: ON OBJECTIVITY

Here Allie is referencing (though, it appears, not making) a claim I have heard before, that developing so-called objectivity is what makes writing a technical—and portable—skill rather than a creative art or a personal expression. And, in my experience, a lot of people seem to think 'objectivity' is a good thing for writers. I believe it is important to note that Allie identifies this kind of supposedly objective writing as "much harder."

In fact, every writer in the study who has used either strategy of genre fluidity—not just Allie—has identified emotion and personal values as central to their writing. Being dislocated from identity and personal experiences, of the writers as well as their audiences and their human connections, seems to diametrically counter the positioning of impersonal or clinical objectivity. As the conversation continued, Allie's shift to the topic of "harder" writing was the start of an unexpected (metaphorical) journey.

SIDEBAR: ANOTHER MINI-POLEMIC

Upon reflection, my analogy comparing difficult—and dare I say conventional—writing to the highly artificial idea of what counts as beautiful enough for a modeling or cover shoot is particularly apt.

An artificial standard of perfection that is inauthentic? What about the messy edges and quirky bits, the unique tones and textures of our skin and hair, the scars and lines that denote our experience? These are the things most likely to be painted over or airbrushed away for a cover shot or a professional portrait.

Yet this analogy, if I extend it further than I did that day, seems to point to the constraints and conventions of a genre format as somewhat plastic. Perhaps resistance to standardization—or at least to any one standardization—is key to genre fluidity.

There are more analogies (or metaphors?) that were suggested right away, and the third one to enter the conversation also seems to focus on writing as difficult, and with lots to hide from view.

M'J: Well, mine is more like a airplane. I've never been on an airplane.

J: Ever?

M'J: Never.

Ruby: Not yet.

M'J: So, in January, I'll be on my first plane and everybody's like, "You need to calm the hell down," because I'm like, "No, I don't wanna go. I don't wanna go." But they keep on saying, "You will hit some turbulence."

The writing will hit some bumps, but sometimes you get the feel of it, you become more—it's smooth and you start leveling it out.

When you start descending with it, during the conclusion of it, "Okay I got it." Then you're gonna—gotta land it. Your idea, your argument, and your writing's there. It's finished. It's like a plane ride to me.

Ruby: To extend that analogy. Is that the right word, English-major people?

Allie: Yeah.

Ruby: To extend an analogy, I think for a lot of folks, getting on a plane and letting it take off requires some kind of blind faith in somebody's ability or blind faith in physics that you don't understand, but you're launching into this—

J: Offense and a defense.

Ruby: —unknown, and let it happen. Does that work for you as part of the analogy? Is there some kind of launch that's part of writing for you?

M'J: Yeah, because whenever you get the instructions, it's all the motives of how you're supposed to go. It's like the captain. You're a passenger.

You're a passenger and you're trying to, [inhales deeply, audibly] "Okay, I'm trusting this paper," and I'm writing it and hopefully I'm doing it right. Or you might be the captain of it and you—

Allie: Yeah, maybe—

SIDEBAR: TAKING FLIGHT

This final idea, introduced by M'J, is the only one of the four (following ducks, photo shoots, and icebergs) that does not follow a plenty-of-stuff-to-hide sort of imagining. It is also the one that appears to focus on success rather than perfection.

This is a profound distinction—and one that I completely missed more than once while studying this data, likely due to being distracted by how entertaining I found this part of the discussion—that I now see as critical to understanding how and why genre fluidity happens.

This airplane analogy is different in another important way, I believe. M'J's comparison is the only one that seems to really involve a community. Spending an entire day being worked on by a hair and makeup team *is*, sort of, about a team; but in that scenario, the model, as the stand-in for the writer, is not actually part *of* the team.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, this sense of belonging to a collective comes across as important to strategies of genre fluidity.

M'J, who was the originator of the airplane and air travel comparisons (even though at that time he had not yet been on an actual airline flight), centers both his identity and his work on those human connections to community. And, for him at least, it results in genre-fluid writing.

The rest of this conversation, which finds this airplane and air travel analogy-slash-metaphor taken up by our own small collective seems to enact that supportive, collective process of creation in a way that is quite moving and important.

M'J: Maybe you're the captain of it.

Ruby: And the paper is the plane, or the writing is the plane. You're hoping for liftoff. Okay. You're hoping for liftoff.

J: The instructions are the captain because that's what's navigating you, showing you how to achieve equilibrium.

M'J: Or you might be the co-pilot.

Allie: I'm starting to build such a great analogy right now. The flight attendants are the grammar and the passengers are the context.

M'J: Just like that, your paper is the plane. You're the captain of your own ship!

Ruby: Right. And then you believe it's gonna lift off.

M'J: You're believing it, and guess what, it does! But when you start hitting turmoil, everything start moving a little bit. Then a sentence might come here, those paragraphs might move over here—

Ruby: Balance things out.

M'J: —just hoping that you hit it.

J: Well, there's something else it requires besides faith. Courage. Moving forward despite the fear that comes. Even when you could just stand there or back away, you have that ability to move forward.

Allie: I like it!

M'J: And that determines everything that happens towards you, “Oh snap, I forgot I have this assignment to do,” And you have to get off that paper a little bit and work on that, come back over here, toward this life situation around you and your paper.

Ruby: But you still have a destination.

M'J: You still have that destination. You still have to keep your eye on the prize. And guess who's the control tower, who's helping leading you towards it?

Ruby: But not now, because you're not in school. So what happens now that you're flying a plane without a co-pilot and without radio control? How are you still flying?

M'J: Let's just say it's a single airplane. You know the smaller planes now?

Ruby: So, you're going to a single prop, but how are you still flying?

M'J: The paper's—that's a good question!

Allie: But you still have the skills to fly.

M'J: You still—it's just you. Just one of those—

Ruby: What flying skill did you bring over? That's the point of this conversation, right? What—when there's not a co-pilot, when there's not radio control, how [do] you still fly? Where are those directions, where's the navigation coming from? Where's the flight plan coming from?

M'J: You're right. That takes time for me to think about, okay?

Ruby: That's what I'm trying to get you to think about!

M'J: All the things you experienced in the past and all people who was there for you, it comes with you. Like one teacher—what my professors taught me, it comes with me.

What I have learned during my experience, what coworkers and colleagues and other peers and students that I have interacted with comes with me as who I am. So, in a sense, those are my planes. My experiences is the plane.

Ruby: I have another analogy that I'd like to introduce. Or maybe it's a metaphor. I always get those confused. [This] almost sounds like a form of muscle memory. You know what muscle memory is? I'm trying to unpack or to deconstruct that muscle memory.

If you're flying now because you have the muscle memory from when you were in school. It might feel unconscious now, but there are all kinds of decisions that are going into the work that you are doing.

Allie: You didn't show up one day and just fly a plane. You had to see what a plane is and then—and we're looking up, thinking about that as writing and what we gain and the skill. You learn words and then you learn how to put them together. Then you learn how to make sentences. Then you learn how to make larger things.

It's this entire process of scaffolding and building and scaffolding and building over and over again until you get to remove the scaffold, that radio control tower, things like that.

If we're thinking—what I said with my skills was like, research or vision or—

Ruby: Reflection.

Allie: Reflection. [[]], you said reflection—

J: Outline.

Allie: Research, outlining.

Ruby: Collaboration, right. Yeah, so I guess—

SIDEBAR: A REMINDER

What got me into this research project in the first place—to add on to the airplane analogy by thinking about using muscle memory to pilot it—is this:

Some writers do not seem to acquire muscle memory. Or they do not realize they can use that muscle memory in other situations that are even slightly different—but especially they do not seem to recognize this utility when in situations that are very different from previous ones.

This project is focused on learning more about the writers who *are* able to access that muscle memory in sometimes-vastly different scenarios of flying (ahem, writing) events.

M'J: So even if we don't have a plane anymore, I guess to say, we are falling from the sky. What is your parachute?

Ruby: Oh, no. No, no, no. That's killing, literally, the entire analogy!

M'J: No, you talking about I don't have a plane no more! Control tower!

Ruby: You don't have a control tower. You're still flying a plane, sure, but here's the thing. part of what I'm trying to get at is to figure out how to get folks who do have that muscle memory, who can repurpose it in these other contexts. To try to deconstruct where that came from and how they were able to retain it, right?

J: So, you're just trying to reach the people who have the muscle memory, not the ones who— Or the ones who have it, but don't realize they have it? Or they haven't used it in a very long time and just—

Ruby: Or they never developed it. Because what some people do for four years or five years—because that's typical for a lot of folks to finish school—is that every semester—

J: Well, six years is actually becoming more common.

Ruby: Every semester, or even every class within a given semester, some people are starting over because to them, it's an entirely new task. Some people may go four years and think it's all one task, and then they get into the workplace and it's like a whole new task. Or they change jobs and it's a whole new task, like this—

Ruby: I'm trying to get a handle on when it works, how it works, why it works, why it works for you. That's why I keep asking you all these obnoxious questions! But I feel like we might be a little bit closer to the answer after today's conversation, so I'm kind of excited about that.

So, how are we doing on time? I'm about to turn off the recording, unless there's something burning about any of these metaphors or analogies or whatever they're called?

Okay.

M'J: Great job, guys!

MORE OF A DIGRESSION THAN A SIDEBAR: PROJECT MISSION

When I first heard this struggle with writing new things was common, I thought that that was the strangest thing. I could not even compute that, because it felt easy to me. And when I found out that my blithe take on what I now know as writing transfer was not the norm, that's when I really first got interested in this issue. How do I figure out this thing that comes so easily to some, and that is never anything but a struggle for other people?

If we who teach writing and communication can figure out how this happens—how it is relatively easy for people—if we can figure out how they got from here to there, then we can perhaps revolutionize the way we teach. The way college writing is being taught has been shifting—sometimes greatly—in response to transfer research, but I believe we still have a ways to go in terms of figuring out how to make that transfer accessible and easy.

This recorded meeting ended on what felt like a positive note, as my closing comments—and M'J's—made clear, but in retrospect I do not think we realized just how much we had come to something important and profound.

Following these annotated transcripts, I next turn to a brief examination of how participants in the project indicated that their engagement with the writing group impacted them and their writing.

IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATION

Because of the community engagement aspect of this project, I was of course interested in whether the experience of being in the writing group impacted the participants, who were engaged in the inherently social rhetorical work of writing. Aware that writers are more likely to recognize their competencies when they feel as though they belong in a particular community, I wanted to check in at the end of the study to see whether participating as a member in this community of activist-writers aided in this alignment, so I included questions in the final interviews to ask about possible impacts from this group interaction.

All the study participants described the experience of being in the loosely-facilitated writing group—especially talking about their writing—as beneficial. About the group discussions, Allie said in her final interview, “it really has infiltrated my identity as a writer, these conversations as a writer, and just my general growth. It’s really impacted so much of what I’m doing.” In particular, as detailed at the end of her case study, she highlighted participation in the group as helping her connect her emotions and her writing. Her understanding of writing as a sacred act filters through her activist writing work as well as her teaching of writing to others.

Though Dave joked that he remembered the snacks more than the conversations about writing, he said in his final interview that participating in them made him more thoughtful about the writing process in general. “I think I tailor the work with a mind towards the discussions we’ve had,” he said, concluding “I’m mindful of the objectives of writing for specific audiences in specific settings to accomplish specific goals.” And Dave, whose typical affect is quite reserved—and who did not initially describe himself as a leader—spoke to me at a scheduled writing group meeting about coming to see writing as enhancing his ability to embrace a leadership role. In the following exchange, his deadpan delivery of the humor only underscored his expanding comfort with writing as a way to practice emotional leadership:

Dave: I've got a lot of cats that need to be herded.

Ruby: That's part of your identity, as the cat herder. I like that.

Dave: I come from a long line of cat herders.

Ruby: Yeah. No doubt. No doubt.

Dave: But I mean, that's what I'm talking about, there's so much emotion caught up in all of this that somebody has to. And if nobody else is going to do it, it's gotta be me.

At the end of the study, Dave also referred to emotion as critical to his work when he discussed how he had changed as a writer since the study began. "I believe I have written some good stuff," claimed Dave in his final interview, "Some effective and some emotive." He continued by looking forward: "I know I can do better, can do more, and will continue to improve by doing more."

J described one result of her participation in the group as being a "greater adventurousness as a writer, marked by an increasing willingness to explore ideas." Further, she said the experience helped her to shape a pair of metaphors for writing that now significantly enrich her understanding of writing as important self-expression:

Writing as a scalpel is therapeutic and life-giving. If cathartic, the writing, no matter what genre it is, releases or "purges" the writer of unpleasant and/or unhealthy feelings or thoughts. Therefore, one emerges from the writing experience healed and rejuvenated in some fashion. The writer also emerges enlightened—of themselves, others, and/or the world—and empowered to share what they have learned. This sharing increases the potential and promise for positive outcome[s] of the writing, such as healing, rejuvenation, enlightenment, and empowerment.

Writing as a dagger is toxic and life-draining. If toxic, the writing, no matter what genre it is, encourages the writer to retain or become captured by unpleasant and/or unhealthy feelings or thoughts. Therefore, one surfaces from the writing experience broken and weakened. The writer also surfaces darkened...[and with] potential and promise for the deleterious outcome of writing, such as hurt, weakness, darkness, and enforcement. (J)

Using extended metaphors as a way to understand complex concepts is very on brand for J, and no one who has had extended conversations with her would find this surprising. She sees the world in this way, so explaining how she now views writing using a completely developed set of metaphors makes sense. That this metaphor grew, at least in part, as a result of her participation in this study, is something I find both gratifying and profound.

For M'J, being a part of the writing group helped him to own his identity as a writer. Before the writing group began, he had hesitated to claim a writerly identity, hedging a bit by saying he was "not a *writer*

writer writer,” but as he described in an interview, things had changed. This brief exchange in our interview was fun to be a part of:

M'J: I'm a writer. I *am* a writer.

Ruby: Are you a *writer* writer writer?

M'J: I *am* a *writer* writer writer!

[laughter]

Ruby: Okay. All right. So what has changed?

M'J: One thing about it is confidence. We always tend to think about our writing for grammar and stuff like this. “Can we do this?” It’s interesting how people construct the idea of what a writer is supposed to be or should be.

When we were going through the writing group, I saw different writers and when they were talking about their writing, I’m like, “Yes, we are writers.”

M'J began the study already chafing at the strictures of grammatical correctness and (so-called) Standard Written English that had sidelined him as a supposedly poor writer throughout his academic career. As his hesitancy to identify as a writer—especially as a successful one—made clear, his experiences with a system that did not value his work on his terms had left a negative residue. The opportunity to be part of a community writing group—along with others who had more traditional writerly credentials, especially including an English major who overtly rejected correctness as a standard—seemed to feed his confidence and allow him to fully embrace a writerly identity.

It was very rewarding for me to work with this group, and their participation made this project possible. I look forward to future projects with more opportunities for being part of and working with community writing groups focused on social and economic justice. In the final chapter that follows, I focus on bringing the data and analysis together to draw some conclusions that, following Baird & Dilger (2017), can at least speak to, if not provide definitive answers to, my research questions.

CHAPTER 7—BRINGING IT TOGETHER: STRATEGIES, COMMONALITIES, PATTERNS

My dissertation's first chapter defined and explored multiple facets of genre fluidity by drawing on writing studies and rhetorical genre studies scholarship; that same chapter defined critical terms and concepts and provided relevant literature reviews. Specifically, I outlined a two-part definition of *genre fluidity* that encompasses the work of writers and communicators when they do one or both of the following:

1. employing multiple texts in multiple genre forms for one purpose;
2. combining and reshaping conventions of multiple genre forms within a single text.

This first part of the definition, as discussed in that first chapter, refers to writing in a broad range of generally recognizable genre formats, while returning to the same purpose in all or most of those texts. The second part of the definition is about writing that crosses, ignores, or dissolves conventional genre boundaries by creating texts that include multiple genre formats used in some combination. The latter part of the first chapter provided a literature review, covering examples of other scholarship examining writing strategies that make use of what I define as genre-fluid. The review covered important work in rhetorical genre studies, writing transfer studies, communication and composition, and technical and professional communication.

The second chapter examined the work of three well-known writers who engage in genre-fluid writing strategies. Alice Walker, best-known as a novelist but prolific in dozens of genre formats, exemplifies the first part of the definition in her work. Gloria Anzaldúa, widely recognized for her genre-busting *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is an example of the second part of the definition. Audre Lorde's body of work encompasses both parts of the definition. My third chapter theorized identity as an embodied and intersectional framework for praxis. In that chapter, my *theorizing* was enacted by applying existing ideas in

new ways, trying things out to learn from the results, explicating ideas and practices for greater understanding, embodying ideas as material actions, and engaging in an empirical theory-to-practice endeavor. In the third chapter I also discussed epistemologies and experiences that undergird my research design and priorities, and I detailed the queer feminist methodologies and methods employed in the project. This chapter included a review of the concept of identity, exploring significant shifts in feminist understandings of this idea: most centrally, it extended the literature review with scholarship on rhetorical identity, intersectionality, and embodiment.

Chapter 4 addressed the contexts within which the writing and activism of the writing group participants takes place, detailing the geographic, socio-political, and community contexts that materially impact their lives and that prompt their engagement and activism aligning with their commitments to their personal values. This discussion of context prefaced in-depth profiles of each of the writing group participants, presented as case studies in Chapter 5. Data collected at individual interviews was written as thick-description case study profiles of each participant in the study. These case studies drew heavily on the words of the participants themselves, allowing their individual personalities, values, and activist commitments to take center stage. Within the case studies, I addressed the project's four guiding research questions. Chapter 6 focused on the writing group discussions, based on recordings of selected conversations from group meetings. In that chapter, I also noted my observations about the community writing group model used as the organizing frame for this project—including discussing how participating in the group projects seems to have impacted the activist-writers in the group.

This seventh and final chapter provides analysis of the data and then turns to findings and conclusions. My observations about genre fluidity come from examining the many contributions of this project's participants, finding commonalities and patterns that contribute to general knowledge about this concept. After addressing limitations of the study, I return to my research questions:

RQ1: What genre-fluid strategies do writers enact in their writing contexts?

RQ2: How and why do writers employ these strategies when they write?

RQ3: What role does identity play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

RQ4: What role does context play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

I explore possible answers to these questions as they are provided by the overall data collected, foregrounding the words of the study participants as those answers are discussed. Following that extended discussion, I provide a summary of findings and conclusions, address implications for rhetoric and rhetoric-adjacent disciplines, and wrap up the chapter—and the dissertation manuscript—with suggestions for further study.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As a project constructed to support a not-new but no-name-agreed-upon-yet concept, this dissertation's only claim to definitive work is that of proffering *genre fluidity* as a defined term with utility across rhetoric (including rhetoric-derived, rhetoric-adjacent) disciplines and beyond. The emergent research design was purposefully exploratory and—with its small *n*, compressed timing for group meetings, selective recording of meetings, and limited funding—the results of the study are neither intended to be nor presented as absolute answers.

For instance, the limited number of participants means the findings related to my research questions are not necessarily broadly applicable. Even for my own scholarly trajectory in business, professional, and technical communication with a grounding in writing studies, limiting study participants to individuals who self-identify as activists and who write as part of their activist endeavors means I cannot necessarily generalize the results to professional communicators across organizational settings outside of activism⁹¹. In terms of business and professional communication, the findings cannot be claimed as definitively generalizable—one participant worked for the federal government (and writing was not part of his paid employment), two were students already assuming professional identities as educators (and, again, one of those wrote mostly outside

⁹¹ Conversely, as I was editing this final chapter in June 2020, a definite turn toward anti-racist work (or at least anti-racist posturing, branding, and public statements) was seemingly taking hold in organizations—from the public, nonprofit, and private sector—where activism has not traditionally been part of organizational discourse and activist commitments have rarely been the *raison d'être*.

of their primary job), and one worked in community health—because none were employed as communication professionals and none worked in the private sector⁹².

Another limitation worth considering is the study's focus on the writers in the project rather than on the texts they produced during the time they were participating. The writing projects of participants were not studied or analyzed, and interviews and writing group conversations did not focus on specific texts in detail. This was part of the study design, of course, as my project did not have the scope or size to study individual texts written by each writer. The data from my study about what writers did was collected through self-reporting, rather than in interviews focused on their texts or the use of technology to capture the writing and editing work of specific texts. Future projects of a larger size could pair those forms of data collection with self-reporting in interviews to gain additional insight.

The phenomenological approach of my project was intended to collect rich, deep data about a few individuals—seeking to learn more about individual experiences in ways that can address, rather than answer, the project's research questions. This knowledge can guide future projects that are larger, longitudinal, focused on specific professions or groups, and that use mixed methods and quantitative designs. See the section on further study near the end of this chapter for specific ideas about where this research can go next.

ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I designed this project to explore what genre-fluid writers do, how and why they use specific strategies, and how identity and context shape those choices. These exploratory questions were designed to add to knowledge and prompt more questions for future study. I have addressed the research questions within each case study, but I also aggregate that data here to emphasize patterns and similarities as well as highlight differences among the study participants. The next section of this chapter speaks directly to the guiding research questions developed for the project.

⁹² However, in a more expansive sense of what constitutes work, workplaces, and a profession (as discussed in a Chapter 4 digression), and the broader view that organizations beyond for-profit businesses and corporations are professional, the findings of this study can be claimed as informative.

I began this chapter with a review of the definition I have developed for genre fluidity—writing about a single topic using multiple genre forms, or combining multiple genre forms and conventions into a single text—and in this next section I return to my findings, which rely on that definition to answer the research questions at the heart of my project. I frame the findings for each of the four questions, but it should be noted that the latter quests (RQ3 and RQ4) are closely intertwined. As an ancillary to this next section, I provide a graphic representation of the variety of genre forms and formats participants used (whether or not they adhered to genre conventions) within the spheres of activist, professional, and personal writing. These diagrams illustrate how the writer-activists involved in the study connected activism with personal and professional writing projects—and they highlight how the most genre-fluid writers (Allie and M’J) have significantly more connections across their activist, personal, and professional writing.

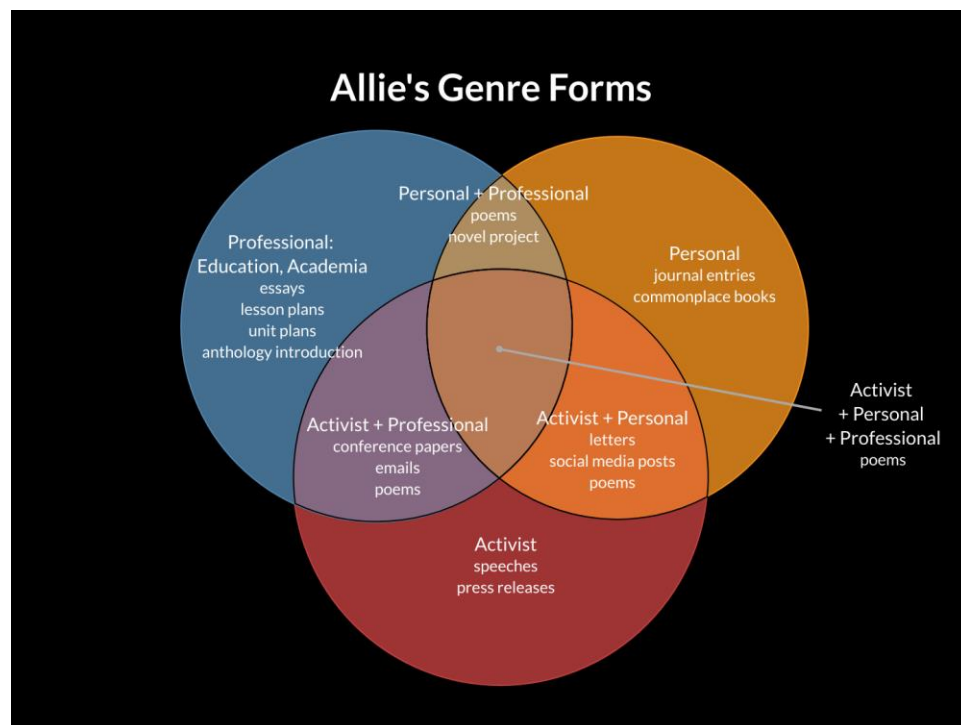


Figure 10 - Allie's genre forms by usage

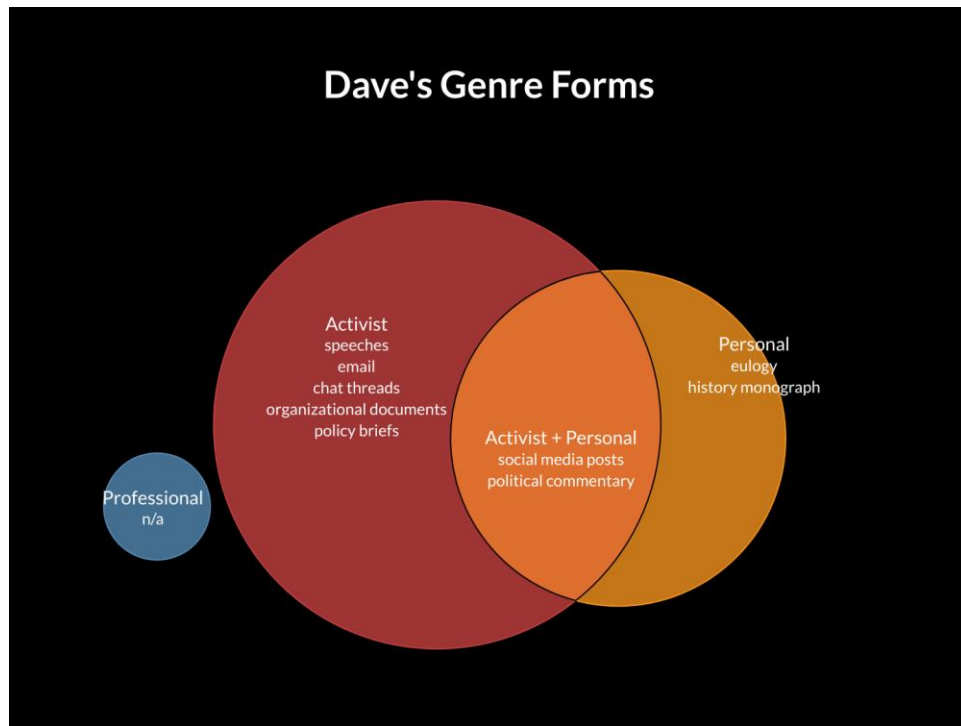


Figure 11 - Dave's genre forms by usage

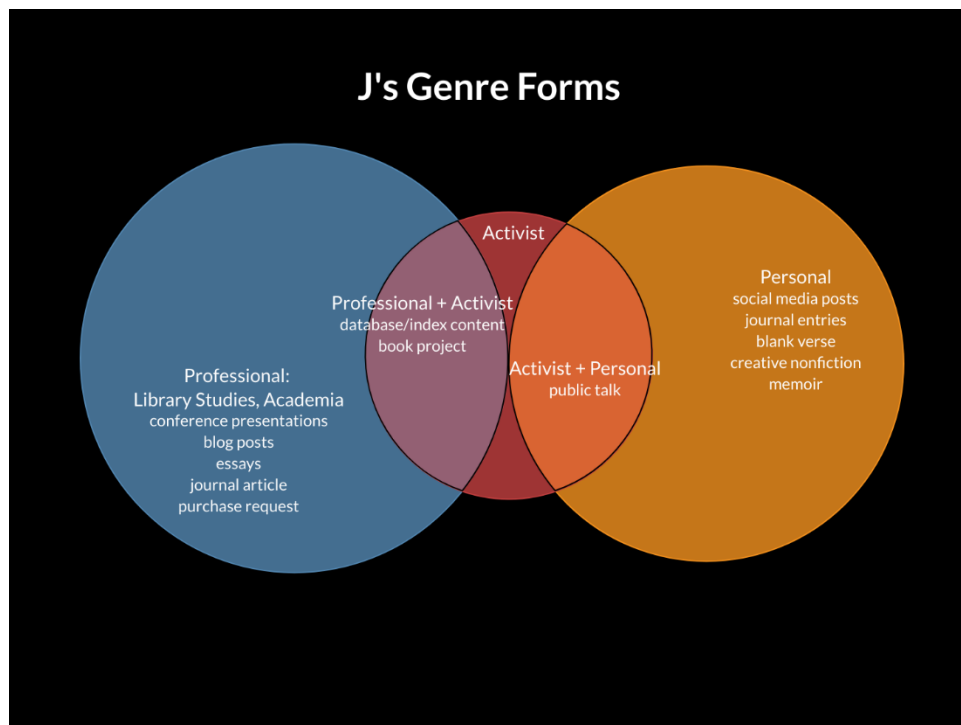


Figure 12 - J's genre forms by usage

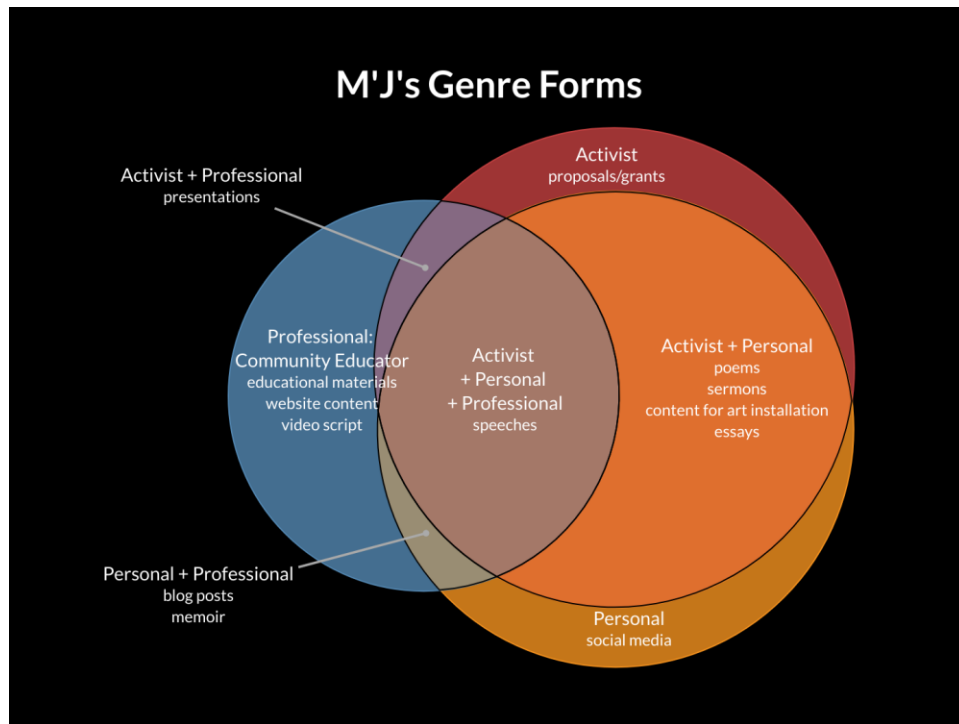


Figure 13 - M'J's genre forms by usage

RQ1: What genre-fluid strategies do writers enact in their writing contexts? I found that most participants in this project did use genre-fluidity in their writing—especially in their activist work. Allie, Dave, and M'J used the first of the two genre-fluid strategies I have defined. That is, they were employing multiple genre forms to achieve (or at least move towards) social and economic justice for communities facing oppression and marginalization. Their use of a range of genre forms to reach multiple audiences across delivery modes—employing multiple texts in multiple genre forms for one purpose—was a common strategy of genre fluidity.

Dave wrote almost exclusively about progressive politics and policies, connecting that advocacy directly to a public service commitment. From speeches and policy briefs to social media posts and essays, his writing was often what he called “policy wonk stuff.” The technical and organizational documents he wrote and his contributions to an organization’s chat thread were to improve the group’s operations because it supported progressive change. Even when engaging deeply with emotion, such as when he delivered the eulogy at his son’s remembrance service, he still focused on public service as a way to articulate the deep connection he and his son had in their shared commitment to making the world a better place for other

people to live in. M'J wrote in many genre forms as part of his professional work as a community educator and advocate; and as an activist and volunteer, he wrote in more genre formats. Through all of these, he was always writing about the importance of justice and equity for all human beings. Allie framed all of her work, including the documents she created in her role as an educator, with feminist concerns about helping young people find their way to empowerment through self-expression.

Allie and M'J used the second strategy of genre fluidity, creating mixed- and multi-genre texts. Allie did this primarily in the drafting stage, when she would often engage in a process of writing first, and then *genre-ing* her text (if she had to) in the latter part of editing. M'J included storytelling, especially narrative and autobiography, in almost every genre format he uses; he also frequently ignored genre conventions in favor of work he viewed as more authentic.

J wrote across multiple genre forms, but the many genre forms she wrote in—primarily professional academic writing or personal writing—did not connect her activism to most of this work. By the end of the study, some of her workplace writing was beginning to focus on the activist causes she supported, and she was beginning to identify organizations and causes where she could apply her writing skills.

RQ2: How and why do writers employ these strategies when they write? Participants in the writing group engaged in genre fluidity in these ways: by drafting without consideration of genre conventions (Allie); by finding new audiences, opportunities, and delivery modes (Dave and M'J); and by finding new needs or problems to address (M'J).

For Allie, the writing she did as a scholar and the writing she did for her teaching job were extensions of her activist commitments; her personal writing was sometimes revised into public-facing and creative work. Allie's writing process included drafting in a sort of pre-genre mode, focusing on her emotional connections to the topics she is writing and thinking about, and then edited and polished the drafted text. Often this work was divided or combined into specific, multiple genre formats for different audiences. Regardless of genre form, her writing always connected to feminist advocacy and education. Dave did not write for his 'day job,' so almost all of his writing was for his activism. Dave primarily used the single-message-in-multiple-forms strategy for his writing work for progressive change. While drafting, he usually had

a genre format in mind that he is writing, although he uses the editing stage to fully impose specific genre conventions on a text. For M'J, his writing for his work and for his community activism were one and the same, and his creative and personal writing were intertwined with his work and activism.

The reasons for employing genre-fluid strategies were directly related to the social and economic justice commitments these writers cared most about. Using these strategies allowed them to take advantage of opportunities to communicate with new audiences (Dave and M'J) and to address new needs and problems they identified (Allie and M'J). Rather than detailing in my own words why these participants wrote the way they did—using genre fluidity to accomplish their goals—I foreground their words one more time (in the following quotes, many of which also appeared in the case studies) for this explanation.

ALLIE:

“This whole idea of writing is to empower people, and it’s to empower yourself and to make that impact that you want to make.”

“It’s to start a revolution.”

“Writing is one of the things that empowers people. It transforms individuals and communities.”

“[I want] more equitable relations between individuals and within communities and within the representations of those communities.”

DAVE:

“It spurs people to action with a lot of my stuff, show up to the meeting, dial the phone number, get in your car, and get in the streets, whatever.”

“The majority of people, all over the world, are having a tough time just getting by. A small minority are setting up the system and it works well for them. I’d like to do what I can to affect that.”

“I need to persist so others know that alternatives to suffering are possible.”

“It is a tool to help change the world.”

M’J:

“I’m fighting for justice, not just justice for a small minority, but justice for all people.”

“We’re fighting for rights here.”

“Social and societal change. I’m trying to help people help themselves, to inspire change. So, what my writing do[es] is tryna help bridge gaps, help people understand that there are some issues [that] need to be talked about, that is impacting everyone. To incite change.”

“[So] more people can live freely. They can walk outside without wondering ‘Will I make it back home? Will I make it back home to my family?’”

RQ3: What role does identity play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

All of the writing group participants articulated their identities in multiple ways. Expanding beyond demographic terms and embodied identities—even as, in some cases, they acknowledged the impact of those—study participants closely connected their identities to their values and to the many contexts within which they observed social and economic injustice. Because some identities are also contextual, the results for this and the next research question are often interconnected.

As a feminist and an educator who is also a young white-coded Chicana, Allie writes from an understanding of self that aligns with the cares of people who may not have the privileges she does. She writes first from emotion, inspiration, or insight—creating text fragments that rarely emerge in a particular genre form. Later, depending on the need, she frames these “nuggets” of writing into one or more (and often mixed) genre pieces. Her feminist educator identity is a strong motivation for almost all the writing she does. Though his reserved and analytical temperament likely also plays a role, Dave’s identities of public servant and progressive directly influence the genre-fluid strategy he uses when writing. As a cis-het white man who also has experienced disability and unemployment for extended period, he has found common cause with people who experience oppression and marginalization based on identities of race, sexuality, and gender—recognizing these harms are different, but are in some ways analogous to the experiences of people whose disabilities or economic class marginalize or limit them. His writing is almost all bound up in his identity as a progressive public servant. As a Black queer Muslim man from a background of generational poverty, M’J has a multi-faceted identity that seems to make it easier for him to find some commonality with almost any human he encounters. He creates a range of texts with a singular focus on justice and equity for all people, including marginalized people who have identities different from his own—especially women and trans people of all genders. Almost every facet of his Black and queer life has been shaped—and often has been circumscribed—by one or more marginalized identities, and his work, whether professional or technical or creative, is about removing those boundaries for everyone with a marginalized identity.

Although not genre-fluid, the writing strategies J selected were directly connected to the aspects of her identity that were most salient for her. She often wrote in her role as a librarian in training and as a graduate student, and it appeared that as she inhabited a professional identity as a librarian more fully, the range of genre formats she wrote was beginning to expand. She was a white bisexual cis woman who has returned to a university setting almost two decades after her time as an undergrad, and that academic context—as well as her identity as a mentor to younger queer students—also has significantly influenced the writing that she does. Determined to immerse herself in student life in a way she did not before, J has been doing a significant amount of personal writing as a way to record those experiences.

RQ4: What role does context play in the selection of writing strategies by individual writers?

Whether genre-fluid or not, all the strategies selected by the four writers in this study were strongly influenced by the contexts—including political, social, economic, cultural, interpersonal, community, and workplace contexts—in which they live and work. Their identities may not always have shaped their *experiences* in specific contexts, but these contexts have nonetheless shaped the values-driven work they choose to engage in as a *response to* those contexts. Because most facets of identity are both experienced in and impacted by contexts, separating the two when discussing genre fluidity is not quite possible.

Allie's social, cultural, and political contexts, including burgeoning anti-immigrant discourse and violence across the U.S. as well as near-daily headlines about sexual assault, shapes her personal, creative, and professional writing. Her late-stage, post-drafting adherence to convention was largely a function of workplace or scholarly contexts. It happened most when she was in a position that required her to follow those imposed dictates; but once she had some autonomy, she expanded beyond the imposed expectations. For example, the lesson plans Allie created for assessment as an undergraduate working with a supervising teacher were absolutely conventional, but once she began work in her own classroom the lesson plans were reshaped to include more personal writing—providing her students with more autonomy, more individualized experiences in the class, and the opportunity to be more personal in *their* writing as well.

Dave sees context as mostly political, or at least directly connected to how political systems impact individuals and communities, so context for him is a major factor in the strategies he employs to be an

effective communicator. His purpose is almost always persuasive, and his audience is almost always the voting public, so Dave selects multiple genre formats that can be effective for those goals and that audience. For example, because the work Dave does is political—and is connected to how political systems impact individuals and communities—this aspect of context determines the genre-fluid strategy he employs to be an effective communicator. The context within which he writes is a state where longstanding significant efforts to disenfranchise poor and minority voters continue. His purpose is generally persuasive, and his audience is primarily the voting public or policymakers, so Dave writes in multiple genre formats that can be effective for those goals and audiences in the specific political context of the highly-gerrymandered state of North Carolina.

Context—especially cultural, social, political, economic, and workplace contexts—strongly influence M’J’s use of genre fluidity when he writes. He employs multiple genre conventions in specific texts, especially in the use of storytelling in even the most clinical setting, and he also creates a range of texts with a singular focus on justice for all people. For example, M’J, more so than for any other participant, his identity was central to his experience within contexts. As a Black queer Muslim man living with an HIV diagnosis, and who has only recently moved away from serious economic precarity, the social and political contexts that impact M’J daily are the racist history of North Carolina, rising anti-Muslim sentiment, and recent divisive anti-queer and anti-worker state legislation. Pervading all of these contexts is the persistent 400-year history of anti-Blackness in the U.S.

COMMONALITIES, PATTERNS, AND OBSERVATIONS

In looking at writing and identity, part of my analysis focused on looking for writing commonalities that aligned with identities in common. In the data from this project, I found several correlations that appear salient to genre fluidity: one between writing processes and identities, and two between the use of genre-fluid writing strategies and identities. This section first discusses the commonalities and patterns found, and then summarizes the overall findings of the study into a list of six statements about genre fluidity.

The general similarities observed in the writing processes of participants in this study were found in the methods used in drafting. Allie and M’J used unstructured drafting practices that were essentially assemblage. They wrote and collected material in what Allie described as “fragments” or “nuggets” of “raw” material. Further into the editing process, they collapsed or expanded genre boundaries when existing ones seemed to be less than functional for an immediate purpose. Allie used voice memos, bullet journals, cloud document files, and other tools to collect and store pieces of non- and not-yet-genred writing, using the various storage sites in much the same way a commonplace book once would have done. She later combined this raw material in different ways to produce texts in multiple genre forms and in mixed-genre formats. Allie also said she was often reluctant to edit material into conventional genre forms, and generally only did so when required. M’J also used an assemblage approach to drafting. He collected inspiring quotes that he used as springboards for writing projects and he also collected small pieces of his own writing: responses to the quotes, thoughts about new and ongoing projects, lines of poetry, and more. These bits of paper—Post-Its, backs of envelopes, and torn pieces of whatever paper he found at hand—frequently were in his pockets or otherwise on his person, such as in his wallet or his shoulder bag. He also used a notes app in his phone, small blank books, and wire-bound notebooks to collect this writing. These assembled materials were collected into first drafts that spanned genre conventions and genre resistance.

M’J and Allie similarly understood their identities as quite multiplicitous. As illustrated in the case studies, they also described their identities by naming many different facets of their multiplicitous identities; each used more than 25 different terms to articulate or describe their identities. Both were twenty-somethings and when the writing group began meeting both were near the cusp of college graduation (he had graduated within the past year, and she was in her next-to-last semester). M’J is Black and Allie is Chicana. Both first learned language in households where so-called standard English was not spoken; he grew up with BVE (Black English Vernacular), and she learned to speak, read, and write first in Portuguese.

Another commonality between Allie and M’J was their rejection of both standardized language use and writing genre conventions as inauthentic. These two clearly and repeatedly rejected prescriptive ideas about grammar, punctuation, and other forms of correctness. They critiqued much of what they were taught

in K-12 (Allie) and in college writing (M'J) as rigid and hung up on rules. Typical comments on the subject from them included “nobody thinks in APA” (Allie) and “No. Just—no” (M'J). M'J and Allie also were the two writers in the study who made use of the multi-genre-single-text strategy of genre-fluidity. Their ready resistance to prescriptiveness in language use and grammar aligned with their similar rejections of genre conventions when taking on writing tasks. Their rejections of correctness and of genre conventions were very similar, despite their dissimilar levels of formal training in writing and language studies, as Allie graduated with a double-major in English and English Education and had training and work experience as a writing center consultant. M'J, whose degrees were in diversity and social justice and in family science, last had a writing course when he took first-year composition. This difference in formal training appeared to be irrelevant to the frequent use of genre fluid strategies than their shared multiplicitous articulations of their identities; in addition, the rejection of “the rules,” without regard to how much time has been spent studying them, appeared to be important for genre-fluid writers.

Dave, who used one of the two strategies of genre fluidity—using multiple conventional genre forms to present the same message—did not share the descriptivist approach that Allie and M'J did. He valued “proper grammar” highly, and frequently already had a genre form in mind when he began his more conventional drafting process. He is also older and white, has attended graduate school, and used significantly fewer different terms (17, compared to 25+)⁹³ to articulate his identities during the study. J is of a similar age to Dave and is white, and she was working on a graduate degree during the time the writing group was meeting. She also shared Dave’s embrace of prescriptive language use and she also drafted her writing projects in more conventional structured ways. Like Dave, J also used fewer different terms (15, compared to 25+)⁹⁴ to name her identities.

It can be difficult to make broad generalizations based on four case studies, but what I know so far about genre fluidity suggests that a descriptivist view of language use, a pre-genred and assemblage-style drafting process, and a highly multiplicitous articulation of self-identity are much more directly connected to

⁹³ Dave also referred to his identity fewer times during the study. Both Allie and M'J did this frequently (47 and 50 times respectively), and Dave mentioned some facet of his identity 28 times.

⁹⁴ J used several terms repeatedly, using just 15 terms while referring to some facet of her identity 36 times.

genre-fluid writing strategies than age, racial identity alone, or graduate education. One identity Dave did share with M'J and Allie was being an activist deeply committed to specific goals. He used one genre-fluid strategy rather than both strategies, but an activist identity is the only one that these three all articulated (and that J, who did not use genre-fluid strategies in her writing, did not share). This does suggest that the genre fluid strategy of using multiple genre formats for a unified purpose may be connected.

My discussion of these commonalities and patterns is based on my analysis of the data from this study on genre fluidity. As this project has been an exploratory study, I make no claim to definitive findings with wide generalizability. Rather, I offer the following observations, based on what my research suggests:

1. *Genre fluidity finds its place with the descriptivists.* Viewing prescriptions of correctness in grammar and other mechanics of writing as important or necessary appears to limit genre-fluidity. Resisting those prescriptions, especially as a way to ground the writing work in authenticity, appears to be a gateway to strategies of genre fluidity. Genre fluidity focuses on success in reaching audiences with an important message, not on perfection of prose or texts.
2. *Genre fluidity thrives alongside multiplicitous identities.* Articulating more facets of identity—especially those that are embodied or grounded in cultures and communities—correlates with increased genre fluidity. Participants who discussed identities in limited and mostly disembodied terms, especially when focusing almost exclusively on professional and political identities, were less likely to use genre-fluid strategies.
3. *Genre fluidity is a kairotic act.* Activist writers frequently expand into multiple new genre formats by choice. They engage in this first strategy of genre fluidity to reach new audiences, to take advantage of new opportunities, and to address newly identified problems or needs. The participants in this project used genre-fluid strategies to expand their reach as activists.
4. *Genre fluidity celebrates authenticity.* Activist writers who engage in resisting, ignoring, blending, and blurring genre boundaries—the second strategy of genre fluidity—do so because they seek new and expanded ways to express themselves and their values. They enact these resistances and disruptions to assert their complex individuality and their authenticity.

5. *Genre fluidity is grounded in community.* Writers who ignore and transgress genre boundaries do so to make connections within and beyond their communities, reaching across boundaries of difference to find commonalities. To draw on M'J's conception of writing as flight in an airplane, genre-fluid writers are able to travel to new and interesting destinations safely because they are part of the team navigating the flight.
6. *Genre fluidity's success is linked to a sophisticated knowledge of audiences.* Writers who engage in genre-fluid strategies focus on communicating their message to audiences. They select, discard, deconstruct, combine, and remake genre forms and conventions as needed—to connect with and convey messages to—audiences.

IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation research grew out of my own questions about writing across and beyond genre constraints, as I seek to understand why these genre-fluid writing strategies come so easily to some writers that they do not even seem to be conscious choices. This project also developed as a response to calls for more research in rhetorical genre studies and to important work that has focused on specific critical concepts in writing studies and in business, professional, and technical communication. In this next brief section, I connect to the recent scholarship as a way to highlight the implications of my findings.

For rhetorical genre studies. As stated in this dissertation's first chapter, one goal of this study was to answer Tardy's (2015) call to examine the work of writers who deliberately and successfully move beyond genre constraints, and my hope is that I have in some small part answered that call.

The participants in this study who engaged in the second form of genre fluidity I focused on in the project (M'J and Allie) were the writers who did move beyond genre constraints, so the insights gained from studying their work have significant implications for rhetorical genre studies. The positioning of genre fluidity as descriptive rather than prescriptive, for instance, suggests that less attention to document formatting and other prescriptive aspects of genre forms and genre sets may be needed. The data here also suggest that beginning the drafting process for a project without having made a genre decision may encourage writing that

extends beyond the typical constraints of a genre format. The seemingly-random drafting method of collecting short pieces of writing and even source material into some form of a commonplace book—an old-school technique which both Allie and M’J used—appears to be worth resurrecting.

Participants in this study who were significantly driven toward reaching new audiences and taking advantage of new opportunities (Dave, Allie, and M’J) employed the first of two strategies of genre fluidity I have described and detailed—the use of multiple genre formats to write about the same topic or for the same general purpose. This is also relevant for rhetorical genre studies, because understanding genre fluidity as kairotic suggests that another way to move beyond genre constraints may be to consider different but otherwise-conventional genre forms in addition to those most typical for a specific recurring rhetorical context. Likewise, thinking about what other (and even unexpected) genre formats might be added to an existing genre set may offer distinct advantages to communicators.

My findings also suggest that authenticity is central to genre fluidity, and this observation aligns with Miller’s (2015) call for more scholarship that focuses on the aim or goals of the communicators who are enacting genres. Adopting the term genre fluidity has the potential to foster deeper engagement with scholars in—and beyond—rhetorical genre studies because it can be a tool for naming and bringing together ongoing research into the practices used by genre-fluid writers. “We have much [to] learn,” Miller wrote, concluding “we need all the tools we can find” (p. 178).

For transfer research in writing studies. Writing transfer⁹⁵, as one of the important concerns of writing studies, often understands writing as both social and rhetorical (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). Recent work in transfer studies (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2020) and on queer orientations in writing studies (Banks, Cox, & Dadas, 2019) recognizes these social and rhetorical aspects as unfixed and changeable, including being open to expansion and disruption. Genre fluidity, as a term with applicability in the extension of these conversations, can be important as this work continues.

⁹⁵ Writing *transfer* refers to the ways in which writers transfer rhetorical moves, methods used in writing processes, and other skills learned in one rhetorical context to use again in another. For example, from first-year college writing to upper-division coursework, from editing and design work as a volunteer to paid employment in the workplace, or from a career in journalism to graduate school writing projects. (And the latter two of these examples are me.)

For all participants in the community writing group, switching from distinct genre form to another distinct genre was kairotic, based on need in a given moment or setting. While none of the participants in this study identified transfer as particularly difficult, they were in many cases engaging in *near* transfer rather than *far* transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1989). For example, a change in genre format for Dave rarely involved a significantly different audience, as he was almost always writing to reach voters and potential voters, those new formats were rarely for any purpose other than to be informative and persuasive. Likewise, J's moves among academic writing genre forms and library-related material were often for similar audiences—academic colleagues and student researchers—so on the surface transfer from one distinct genre to another was not predicated on a far reach. This observation aligns with previous research in near transfer; and for scholars with interest in the connections between genre selection, refusal, or expansion, my findings make connections that can inform further research.

My project's focus on activist-writers adds to transfer research's scholarship on the understanding of writing as social and rhetorical. The study data suggest that genre fluidity is closely connected to authenticity and is grounded in community further contribute to these scholarly conversations. For example, writing group participants who wrote in multiple conventional genre formats (Allie, Dave, and M'J) all identified their personal values and deep emotional engagement as important for their success in crossing genre boundaries. As Duffy (2015) wrote in Adler-Kassner and Wardle's *Naming What We Know*, writing “engages us with others and thus with problems associated with the moral life: What shall I say? To whom do I speak? What obligations follow from my words? What are the consequences?” (p. 32). These same concerns were primary for M'J, Dave, and Allie.

Because writing pedagogy is frequently concerned with transfer, several of my findings are relevant for anyone in the field who teaches writing. Namely, this study suggests that prescriptive approaches to writing significantly inhibit genre fluidity, and it suggests that a sophisticated understanding of audiences is more important for genre-fluid work than attention to genre forms and formats. Extending these findings by applying logic, I suggest that writers who use strategies of genre fluidity can write successfully in a wider range of genre formats; therefore, teaching writing in ways that encourage genre fluidity will benefit students.

On a related note about pedagogy, though not specific to genre fluidity, the members of the community writing group who identified transfer as one of their core writing strengths (J and Allie) named experiences and resources that significantly contributed to their ability to succeed at both near (J and Allie) and far (Allie) writing transfer. These supports included discussions with other writers, mentoring conversations with writing experts and disciplinary experts, access to examples of real texts—Allie called them mentor texts, and J called them model texts—in new genre forms, and confidence in their own abilities. This additional finding also aligns with prior transfer research, and it is a useful reminder of how community membership and identity impact the work of writers at all levels.

For business, professional, and technical communication. One aspect of this project with specific implications for professional communication, including business communication and technical communication⁹⁶, is the focus on theorizing as an application of existing ideas to new situations. These sub-disciplines of communication all value problem-solving, practice, and praxis; my work aligns with these disciplinary values because it argues for aggregating existing and ongoing work to examine the communication strategies I have named genre fluidity in new ways. Adjacent work in cultural studies and from a range of disciplines which have turned their focus toward social and economic justice are also important for professional communication, offering valuable sources for this kind of theorizing.

Drawing on rhetorical genre studies and writing transfer studies also situates my project in business and professional communication because rhetoric and writing scholarship are both pertinent to the practice of communication and to teaching in business, professional, and technical communication. Business communication also draws on a range of other disciplines (neuroscience and linguistics, among others) to apply existing research in new ways.

Several findings from my project suggest that even more inter-, cross-, and trans-disciplinary (or, perhaps, disciplinarily fluid) approaches should be considered. Genre fluidity appears to be a strategy used by

⁹⁶ As previously stated, I view professional communication as an umbrella term that also includes technical communication and business communication. (It is the universalist in me, no doubt, which makes this blurring of boundaries between sub-disciplines as worthy. Or is it the genre-fluid writer in me?) Where professional, technical, and business communication connect and overlap with each other—and with science communication and other similar sub-disciplines—is, as best I can determine, something of an open question.

writers whose multiplicitous identities are well-articulated and present, especially identities that are embodied and connected to communities; for example, the most genre-fluid participants in my research project (MJ and Allie) each articulated more than 25 different components of their identities. Genre fluidity is grounded in community, so genre-fluid communication strategies are of interest in business communication, where scholars (Chang, Chou & Han, 2020; Hasecki, Scott, & Gaillard, 2020) recently have been exploring how identity and community membership impact communication. Genre fluidity makes full use of sophisticated knowledge of audiences, which is a central concern of effective business communication.

Authenticity is another hallmark of genre-fluid writing, as these writers rejected putative objectivity. This connection of genre fluidity to multiplicitous identities, authenticity, and community contexts is directly in the line of scholarship in technical communication that de-centers the fiction of objectivity (Frost, 2016; Haas, 2012; Jones, 2016b; Small, 2017). The genre-fluid participants in my community writing group were all activists as well as writers, so technical communication's recent turn toward social justice (Haas & Eble, 2018; Jones, 2016a; Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016) is another example of how genre fluidity can be important to the field.

This project on genre fluidity is also in part a response to calls for—and the need for—more culturally-connected work in technical and professional communication. The essay collection *Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-first Century*, by Angela Haas and Michelle Eble, calls for drawing on cultural theories that can result in “more culturally responsive and responsible documents and technologies” (p. 8). Haas and Eble (2018) also noted the utility and benefits of “interfacing cultural theories with social justice frameworks” in professional and technical communication; this approach, they also say, “better positions [communicators] as agents for redressing workplace, public, civic, and environmental inequities” (p. 8). Because some much of my study of genre fluidity highlights identities, contexts, embodiment, and community, one passage from Haas and Eble's writing about a number of crucial understandings that need to be fostered in technical and professional communication seems absolutely relevant. That list includes these priorities:

- the effects of globalization on local environmental, scientific, technological, cultural, and rhetorical practices,

- the relationships between rhetorics, places, power, agency, networks, infrastructures, and institutions—and how space and place have real political and embodied effects on (in)justice and rights, [and]
- how bodies, embodiment, and risks affect teacher, student, practitioner, professional, and public identities—as well as knowledge production and lived realities” (Haas & Eble, 2018, p. 12).

Studying genre fluidity has significant implications for technical and professional communication because it can address the need for these critical understandings. In addition, making use of—and teaching—strategies of genre fluidity can move the field closer to these priorities that Haas and Eble have identified.

Genre fluidity is kairotic, offering ways to reaching in new audiences and accessing wider opportunities; this also highlights its importance for professional communication. My project’s queerness also responds to Dadas and Cox’s (2019) call for explicitly queer work in professional writing scholarship. This kind of research, as they rightly note, is needed to challenge normative ideas about success and to expand the range of strategies we can use to collectively address the kinds of problems professional writing exists to solve (Dadas & Cox, 2019). Scholarship in genre fluidity is an answer to this critical call.

Detailing the many other fields where genre fluidity has potential implications is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the intertwining of identities, contexts, embodiment, and community memberships means a list of other fields is fairly extensive; among these are communication studies, advocacy studies, gender studies, queer studies, disability studies, cultural studies. Other rhetoric-adjacent fields and social science disciplines—especially those concerned with social and economic justice and with change-making and praxis as central research interests—are likely sites where genre fluidity can be important.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

As stated earlier in this chapter, further research to extend the work of this project should begin with longer studies and much bigger groups of participants. Using mixed methods and quantitative research methods can also extend and expand on the findings presented here. Replicable research projects that focus on specific populations have significant potential to develop applicable key concepts in genre fluidity.

Some projects might narrow the focus to the first iteration of genre fluidity—employing multiple texts in multiple genre forms for one purpose—and others could center on the second genre-fluid strategy—

that of combining and reshaping conventions of multiple genre forms within a single text. For that second part of the definition, studies drawing on queer theory and using queer research methods may provide significant insight. In general, more business, professional, and technical communication research projects could draw on the significant body of work about identity that writing studies has already produced.

Future trajectories of particular interest to me include focusing on several specific populations: writers with multiply-marginalized identities; professional and technical writers in B-Corporations and nonprofit organizations; grant writers without post-high-school training in writing or communication; and business communicators whose training includes writing degrees. I also see significant value in further exploration of writerly identity, especially in the resistance to claiming it, and in further examining how participation in writing groups can impact the ownership of that identity.

Finally—and again—I call for scholars across disciplines and subdisciplines to adopt the term *genre fluidity* to refer to writing that strategically uses multiple texts in multiple genre formats for a singular purpose, and to writing that combines and reshapes conventions of multiple genre forms within single texts. The more these strategies are named with a single term, the more clearly all researchers, writers, and educators will grasp the wide applicability of genre fluidity to the work that we do.

CLOSING WORDS

My research and my advocacy for the term *genre fluidity* both have implications for rhetorical genre studies, writing transfer studies, and business, professional, and technical communication, as well as for related fields. Further scholarship on this topic eventually will mean that writers are better equipped to engage in genre-fluid strategies; therefore, genre fluidity research also has critical implications for social and economic justice work both inside and outside the academy, and is particularly useful for researchers, practitioners, and educators in business, professional, and technical communication

The next step, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is to adopt *genre fluidity* as the umbrella term for both multiple-genre-forms-single-purpose and mixed-multi-genre-texts strategies. Genre fluidity has potential to expand understanding of the range of tools and strategies writers employ to accomplish rhetorical

goals. Genre fluidity's multiplicitous aspects can parallel and complement the complexity of identities, promising an expansion of individualized expressions in robust public discourse and in workplace and academic spaces as well. Given this potential, I argue that coalescing existing scholarship of these rhetorical practices through a genre-fluid framing sets the stage for further study—and this dissertation project attempts to begin that important work.

At certain points in this document, I have attempted to enact a genre-fluid writing strategy as I put this manuscript together. The organization includes digressions and interruptions of memoir, mini-polemics, sidebars, and occasional storytelling. I have focused on well-known writers and their bodies of work (humanities scholarship) and also have worked with community member participants (social science scholarship) who are activists engaged in working for social and economic justice (the ultimate goal of my work as well. This use of genre-fluidity in the text is queer (open to new forms and to possible failure) and feminist (multi-vocal and praxis-oriented), and it is both personal and political.

Genre fluidity can open up academic and community spaces to new possibilities and can dissolve some of the barriers between—and to—them. It has potential for rhetoric and rhetoric-adjacent fields—and, more broadly, the humanities, as disciplines that engage language in overtly rhetorical ways, and for the social sciences, as disciplines that study people and institutions—to come to a deeper, more complicated understanding of the range of strategies writers and rhetors use.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Ruby Nancy](#)
CC: [Matthew Cox](#)
[Ruby Nancy](#)
Date: 8/8/2018
Re: [UMCIRB 18-001336](#)
Genre and Writerly Identity

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 8/7/2018 to 8/6/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6,7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Dissertation Prospectus	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Informed Consent Document	Consent Forms
Interview "Script"	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
PNG file to post on social media and to print as a flyer	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Survey Instrument	Surveys and Questionnaires

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you an advocate for social and economic justice? Are you a community volunteer, organizer, or activist in (or near) Greenville, North Carolina?

Participants needed for a community writing group as part of a study at East Carolina University!
We will meet face to face and work together in an online forum.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the choices and decisions that community members make when they support and write about social and economic justice causes. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a community volunteer, organizer, or activist involved with a nonprofit organization or social movement in Eastern North Carolina and are not a professional writer. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, I hope to learn about how identity can impact the way community members write when they engage in community work for social and economic justice. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about nine people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

You should not volunteer for this study if you are: (1) under 18 years of age; (2) an elected official, a candidate for political office, or a paid staff member of a political campaign or political party; (3) a person whose primary income is from paid writing work; or (4) unwilling to write and talk about your writing during the research study.

Accessibility for disability, economic class, and/or marginalized identity is fundamental to this project.

Questions? Need more information? Want to sign up?

Contact me: Ruby Nancy

PhD Candidate in Rhetoric, Writing, and Professional Communication at East Carolina University

Email: nancyr15@students.ecu.edu ~ Text: 309.631.4525 ~ Twitter: [@rubykirknancy](https://twitter.com/rubykirknancy) ~ Facebook: Ruby Kirk Nancy

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

East Carolina University



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research
that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Genre and Writerly Identity: Community Rhetorics, Re-thinking 'The Workplace,' and Social and Economic Justice

Principal Investigator (Person in Charge of this Study): Ruby Nancy, PhD Candidate in Rhetoric, Writing, and Professional Communication

Department or Division: Department of English

Address: Mail Stop 555, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 277858

Telephone #: 30-631-4525

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the choices and decisions that community members make when they support and write about social and economic justice causes. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a community volunteer, organizer, or activist involved with a nonprofit organization or social movement in Eastern North Carolina and are not a professional writer.

The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, I hope to learn about how identity can impact the way community members write when they engage in community work for social and economic justice. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about nine people to do so.

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What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at meeting spaces at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greenville, North Carolina and on the East Carolina University campus. You will need to come to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greenville, North Carolina and/or the East Carolina University campus ten times during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is fifteen hours over the next four months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the research study where I ask you questions about your identity, about your volunteer work and advocacy in the community, and the writing that you do.
- Participate in a face-to-face writing group and an on-line forum with other study participants, including talking with me and with other participants about your writing.

Study Title: Genre and Writerly Identity: Community Rhetorics, Re-thinking 'The Workplace,' and Social and Economic Justice

- Complete brief surveys (using a phone or a computer) each week for eight weeks.
- Complete short reflective writing assignments each week for eight weeks.
- Share two or more writing projects with me and with two or more other participants in the writing group.

Interviews will be audio-recorded. Some sessions of the writing group meetings may be recorded (and, if so, the planned recording will be announced at the beginning of that session). Your participation in the on-line forum, your responses to surveys, your reflective writing, and your shared writing projects will be collected by me. This collected information will be referenced when I interview you during the middle and at the end of the research study.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

I do not know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. By participating in this research study, you may come to view your writing in a different way. There may or may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

I will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. I may be able to provide (screened and trained) child care and/or local transportation if needed for you to participate in the study. I may be able to provide meals to participants during the writing group meetings.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

The East Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

Your name and contact information will be kept by me for the duration of the study, and will be stored on secure devices (password-protected computer notebook, lockscreen-protected phone, password-protected desktop computer) which connect with each other using secure data connections.

During and after the study, all the information collected (recorded and transcribed interviews, transcripts of online forums, reflective writing, group discussions, and shared writing projects) will be stored, separate from your full name and contact information, in digital form on the same (or similar) devices. After the study, the collected information will be stored on a departmental PirateDrive space at East Carolina University, and will be destroyed after five years.

If you choose a pseudonym it will be used throughout the research study, and all collected information will be identified using your pseudonym rather than your name. The results of the study will be used in publications and conference presentations, and will identify individual participants by pseudonym, first name, or initials rather than by full name. Transcriptions of recorded information, rather than the recordings, will be used in all publications and presentations unless you provide explicit additional permission in writing for the direct use of recorded material.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Study Title: Genre and Writerly Identity: Community Rhetorics, Re-thinking 'The Workplace,' and Social and Economic Justice

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 309-631-4525 (weekdays, between 9am and 5pm).

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the ORIC, at 252-744-1971.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Initial Interview Questions for Writing Group Participants

- How do you define “writing”?
- What is writing “good for”?
- How “successful” are you as a writer?
- What is good/effective/strong/clear writing?

- How do you define/describe yourself, other than as a writer?
- What role does writing play in this self-definition/identity/description?
- What kind of writer are you?
- What kind of writing do you do?

- What do you want/need to accomplish through writing?
- What would you *like* to achieve?
- What forms of writing (genre forms) would/could/should that writing—for that goal/accomplishment—take?
- How would accomplishment/achievement/success be defined?

- What would be different (about yourself, the community, the world, etc.) if you achieve success?

APPENDIX E: FINAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Final interview questions for writing group participants

The sense I have from our previous conversations is that two of the central components of your identity are [A] and [B]. Does that seem accurate?

<follow up, depending on the response>

Can you talk about how [A] OR [being part of A] has shaped your identity?

This [long-term] connection has influenced your values in what way?

How has [A] contributed to your commitments to activism and community work?

Your participation in public conversations about certain topics?

How does [A] connect to the kind of writing that you do?

The topics that you write about?

Can you talk about how [B] OR [being part of B] has shaped your identity?

This [long-term] connection has influenced your values in what way?

How has [B] contributed to your commitments to activism and community work?

Your participation in public conversations about certain topics?

How does [B] connect to the kind of writing that you do?

The topics that you write about?

Repeat some of initial questions:

How do you define “writing”?

What is writing “good for”?

What do you want/need to accomplish through writing?

How would accomplishment/achievement/success be defined?

What would be different (about yourself, the community, the world) if you achieve success?

(continued on next page)

When we began the study, you said this about yourself as a writer:

<quote from initial interview>

Is this still an accurate description?

If not, how would you describe yourself now as a writer?

And what do you think has prompted the change?

We have talked a lot about writing during this study, including about genre forms and writing strategies.

In what way(s), if any, have these conversations made you think about your writing differently?

Impacted what you write or how you write?

Have you noticed any changes in the way you write?

Different genre forms? Different topics? Different audiences?

Have you taken on any new (or new kinds of) writing projects?

I defined this project as a participatory one, which means that in some ways I see it as a process of working together. Sometimes we were meeting one-on-one, and sometimes we met in small groups.

In terms of those small group conversations, how (if at all) do you think differently about the way you write?

Do you have a different sense of yourself as a writer?

Any different ideas about what writing is?

What about genre forms, conventions, an/or boundaries?

What about writing strategies that can be useful to you in various context?

Tell me about a time (since the study began) where you needed (or wanted) to write something—or write in a way—that you have not before.

What strategies did you use?

What kind of writing were you doing?

What genre form(s)?

When we began this study, it was in the fall of 2018, and a lot of things have happened since then.

This is true in our personal lives, in local and regional contexts, and in national and international contexts as well.

Can you name specific kinds of contexts that have significantly impacted you?

Describe how they impacted you?

Impacted your writing?

Is there anything I have not asked you---about writing, about identity, about genre, about the study or your experience in the study---that I have not asked? That you want to talk about now?

